

Aether's Legacy

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Aether's Legacy

by [LightNS](#)

Summary

“You’re... not afraid?” His voice was barely a peep and he half-turned away while still keeping him in his peripheral. On instinct, his fingers reached up and traced the edges of the crystal around his neck, readying to grasp it as he awaited his answer.

“Why would I be afraid?” He sounded genuinely confused. “You’re like the coolest person I’ve met! Plus—” he poked his side and George yelped, jumping back from the ticklish sensation. “You’re so scrawny and small! I’d never be afraid of you!”

George never wanted to be *one of them*. But at eight years old, he discovered he was a Psychic and he was committed into a faraway island academy for Extramundanes. Despite the difficulty of making friends when even other super-powered classmates are afraid of him, George finds a tight-knit group of best friends who aren't afraid to stand up for him.

Yet with age comes his developing abilities, and as he grapples for control, the

disappearance of one of his best friends leads George and his friends on a runaway road trip to rescue him. However, they fail to realize their true adversary is the threatening power searing inside one of their own.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Welcome to AGE: Part I

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to [Grav](#), [Winter](#) and [Beck](#) (@princodemeter @yourlazykitkat and @aenqa on Tumblr) for being such amazing betas and great cheerleaders! Go check them out if you haven't, they're pretty amazing writers! Also a HUGE thank you to [Thal](#) (@thal-chandra) for their BEAUTIFUL artwork!

Edit: This chapter has been revised for the printed copy as of 01/29/22

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A danger to society—it's what they called him at eight years old.

It hadn't been his fault.

His mind was jumbled. His trembling hands were clutching his sides. Thousands of microscopic ants crept beneath his skin, aching to release this strange pent-up energy pumping through him. He could hardly breathe over the disinfectant stinging his white cage like it was trying to cleanse him of this new sickness taking over his body.

He hadn't meant to do it. He wasn't even sure how he had done it.

But he remembered his teacher's terror-stricken expression the second the book on his desk had started floating mid-air. He remembered the way his classmates yelped and backed away. He remembered the way the pretty girl who sat in front of him pointed and shouted something about George being *one of them*.

He had never wanted to be one of them.

It had taken fifteen minutes for his parents to burst into the room they had locked him in. His mother was the first to sprint toward him and press his face against her fluffy winter coat. His teacher couldn't even look him in the eye as they left the classroom. He couldn't understand why everyone was so afraid of him.

It was when his parents drove him to a far-away place from their house in London that his mother turned to him with a sad smile and caressed his cheek.

"We're going to get you checked out, honey. It's going to be alright. We're going to fix you."

Fix me? I don't need fixing, had been his first thought.

The people in white suits ripped him away from his parents, and even though George struggled against their grip, reached out in confused sobs, and shouted for them, his parents only watched him.

And now, entrapped inside white walls with blinking red dots at every corner, there was nowhere to go.

He squeezed his eyes tight. He wished to wake up. But when he opened his eyes, he was still there.

George's eyes locked onto the boy with chestnut hair and brown eyes that stood before him—the one who wore white pajamas and whose feet were barefoot. His fingers hovered over the glass. The boy mimicked him.

It was when he leaned closer that the white light on the ceiling reflected against the boy's eyes. What appeared an unfamiliar memory flashed in his mind. Blinding light. White-eyes. The dreadful sensation of the floor disappearing beneath him.

His breath hitched. He stumbled back and tripped over his own feet. He reached across the floor for something—someone to hold.

But he was alone.

He hugged his knees to his chest and stared at the boy inside the glass—the one that everyone feared.

The tempered glass faded. Behind it, his parents were clutching to each other with lines of tears on their cheeks. There was a man beside them. He was wearing a long white coat and specs that made his eyes big. He was talking, but George couldn't hear him.

It must have been bad news, however, because his mom cupped her nose with both hands and collapsed her weight onto his dad's arms as if they had just found out their only son was dead. Maybe he was. Maybe this was the heaven they spoke so fondly of. If so, heaven didn't look very nice.

The man stared into George's eyes with pity. The glass faded back. The reflection that greeted him every morning stared back at him with the face of a stranger.

He clutched his ankles tight and pressed his head into his knees with aching eyes. He rocked back and forth, attempting to soothe the chaos swarming his head.

The opening door made him jolt to his feet. His parents approached him with hesitance, and his mother's trembling hand reached to graze his cheek but failed to do so. He was almost tempted to wrap his arms around her and beg her to take them back home. But the sheer dread in her eyes kept him frozen to his spot.

"Sweetheart... you're going to be okay. Mummy and Daddy have to go now, but these people... they're going to take you somewhere safe. You'll learn to control your—" the words died at her throat with a sob that burned itself into his memory, "— your disorder there."

His dad kneeled, and his hands hovered over his arms, but he didn't touch him. Instead, he unchained the crystal pendant from his neck, the one his grandmother had gifted him before she had passed, and he put it around George's neck.

"This will help you feel safe. You're going to be alright. You're strong, and I promise you will get through this."

It was the last he would see of them for a long time.

Everything was blurry after that. The people in white suits escorted him to a plane. His wrists were chained together with two metal cuffs that pinched his skin like claws. They were in the sky for hours until the lady beside him pointed out the cabin window.

George's eyes widened when he saw it: the lonesome piece of land surrounded by a vast ocean.

A mountain bigger than anything he had ever seen. Beautiful beaches with blue seashores. White birds flying over the hoods of the trees.

When they descended, the lady smiled at him, but it didn't help the heavy feeling stuck at the back of his throat.

"Welcome to AGE, George. Your new home."

Even his own kind was terrified of George.

Despite having similar abilities, the other kids avoided him at all costs, often turning in the opposite direction when they saw him in the hallway or talking with their friends in hushed murmurs when he passed.

It was his new normal.

On his first day during supper, he had clutched onto his trade like a life source as he shuffled between rowdy tables of laughing and talking kids and wondering gazes following him. For the first time, he wished he could return to his old school where nobody paid him any attention.

He came to a stop when he realized he didn't know where he was going. He looked across the open room with a sick stomach.

A group of girls giggling amongst themselves as they watched one of the Pyromentals at the opposing table show off his fire-bending skills. A teacher stomping toward the boy, slapping the back of his head, and shouting something about powers being prohibited in the mess hall. A pretty girl who was sitting by herself immersed in a novel by one of the far end tables next to the enormous windows that displayed the white beach in the distance.

When she noticed him staring, she offered him a soft smile that made his ears go hot. She waved him over, and he almost tripped over his own feet when he started walking again. He approached the table like a frightened rodent and muttered something like, "Is this seat taken?"

"No." Her smile widened. Her brown eyes beamed in the sunlight and her teeth sparkled like in one of those toothpaste commercials his mom used to complain about. She scooted to the side and invited him to sit by her.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"George."

"I'm Maya!"

He smiled, and they ate in silence for the first half of their meal. Maya left her novel untouched by her plate and glanced at him every so often which only made him keep his eyes on his food.

"Are you a first-year too?"

He nodded.

"This place is so cool, isn't it? It's so pretty, and everyone has really cool powers. I saw one of the Bios run through an obstacle course like in one of those ninja movies. I wish I could run that fast."

But Elementals are so cool too, I even made friends with a water type yesterday and I'm learning so much about my powers!"

She cupped her hands together and a beam of sunlight wrapped around them like she was holding an orb of pure gold. Brilliant wonder twinkled in her eyes when she looked up at him. His jaw fell open, and he stared with the same level of astonishment, having never seen powers like that so up close before.

"I'm a Photomental! Are you an Elemental too?"

His cheeks warmed, and he shook his head.

"What are you then? Wait! Don't tell me. Are you a shifter? I love shifters!"

Her intent and curious gaze made him blush harder, and he didn't think before responding, "Psychic."

She went silent. Her cheerful attitude faded. The light around her fingers untangled, and a nervous smile replaced her previous one.

"Oh," she murmured. "Psychic..?"

The tremble in her voice felt like a shaky dagger piercing his chest. He had been bullied at his old school. He had been made fun of a lot for preferring to stay in the classroom to read instead of hanging out in the playground. He was used to that.

But none of it compared to raw fear in her voice. The way she scooted away and slid her plate a little further. The way she sent a nervous glance to one of the teachers scolding a student nearby like she was silently calling for help.

He finished his food quickly after that. He grabbed his plate and hurried away without so much as a goodbye. Maya didn't say anything.

After that, he started eating his meals by himself—outside, in the hallways, at the library. Anywhere without people around.

Sometimes, he took classes with the other five Psychics in the school, but they were all older than him. Most of the time, he was in individual settings. His counselor, Sarah, told him it was because young Psychics were too dangerous to study with the other kids. He couldn't help the pang of envy that struck him every time he saw kids in the lounge room working on projects, studying for their tests together, and making friends.

His favorite teachers were the ones who didn't treat him like a biohazard—the ones who at least tried to smile and weren't afraid to look over his shoulder when he took his tests. He hated the ones who put his desk at the back of the classroom and taught him from a distance like he had some sort of deadly contagious disease.

Unlike the other kids, George avoided using his powers outside of class. While most of his classmates were thrilled to show off their skills, nobody was interested in watching George levitate stuff, if only for the unsteady movements and unpredictable aim. It scared him too, but Sarah said it was necessary to prevent accidents.

He was also required to take mindfulness and meditation classes that helped him focus so he could better control his abilities, though he didn't believe they helped all that much. His mind was always messy when he used his powers.

For the most part, however, his first year at the Academy for Gifted Extramundanes wasn't much different from his life back at home. When he wasn't in his specialized classes or in counseling, he was out by the garden next to his favorite oak tree at the edge of the forest. His nose was buried in a fantasy book half the time.

He loved immersing himself in imaginary worlds full of elves and wizards where abilities like his weren't deemed a curse by society. They were worlds where ancient mentors guided people like him and taught them how to love their powers. They were worlds in which he could've lived a peaceful life by the prairie and where his powers would help him in his daily life instead of weighing him down like two boulders at the shoulders.

He video-called his parents a lot. He used the computers by the common area, and though they were always crowded with kids chatting away with their outside friends and family, they always mysteriously emptied when George got there.

When the picture would load up into the familiar faces he used to see every morning, he would smile at their excitement. They would ask him about the island and how he was doing in school. The only topic George loved talking about was the new places he would find during his free time exploring the premises of the academy or the latest book he was reading. He hated that the conversations always ended with the same question.

"Have they found a cure?"

His answer was always no, and he had to hold back from telling them what Sarah had answered when he asked.

"You can't be cured of your abilities. You just have to learn to keep them in check."

"Why don't you tell the other kids that?" His words were enlaced with guilt, and his hand clutched his necklace tight.

"Your powers are different, George. They're based on your thoughts and feelings. Our minds can be a little hectic sometimes, so you need to know how to levitate stuff without hurting people in case something triggers you, and you can't use them outside of class so we don't risk accidents."

When Sarah noticed the tears at the corners of his eyes, she smiled and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry. We'll figure it out. There's no reason to feel scared."

"When can I study with the other kids?"

"Soon, George. Very soon."

George was nine when he met him—the boy with the yellow eyes.

He had been comfortable reading his newest fantasy novel under the shadow of his tree on a sunny day when he heard shuffling from the branches above him. At first, he thought it was a squirrel or a chipmunk. That was until an upside-down head dropped beside him and stared him down with a spark of interest.

George yelped and bumped the back of his head against the trunk, and his book flew out of his hands. The boy hanging next to him wheezed so loud he thought a tea kettle could be brewing

nearby.

He was suspended from one of the branches with a rope, and both his hands and feet were clinging to it like some sort of acrobat. His medium-length hair shined the color of golden sand in the light of the sun. He was wearing a creepy white smiley-face mask that covered the top half of his face. George found himself wondering how he could even see with that thing.

When the boy released his grip on the rope, George instinctively lunged forward to try to catch him. Fortunately, the kid back-flipped mid-air and landed on his feet unfazed. Unfortunately, George ended up sprawled on the ground with a mouthful of dirt.

“What are you doing?” The boy laughed and stared down at George with his head tilted.

George scurried to his feet and coughed out bits of dirt. “I was trying to catch you. How do you just jump off a tree like that? Are you crazy?”

“How do you just jump off a tree like that! Are you crazy!” the boy mimicked him with a terrible attempt at a British accent.

His tea kettle wheezes made George smile, but he pretended he didn’t when the boy recovered from his cackling and looked back at him.

“I’m Dream!” he said.

“Dream?” George scoffed and sent him a weird look. “What kind of a name is that?”

“A fake one, duh!”

“That’s a stupid name. What’s your real one?”

“Why do you want to know?” Dream responded with furrowed eyebrows and a scrutinizing stare. He poked his head too far into George’s personal bubble, and he stumbled back, his back hitting the tree trunk in the process.

“I was just curious. My name is George.”

“George,” Dream pronounced it and let it sit on his tongue for a second before saying, “Better than Clay, I guess.” His eyes landed on the book lying face down on the dirt.

Figuring out his intention, George rushed to grab it, but Dream picked it up before George could even bend down.

“Harry Potter.” He read the title and glanced back at George with an unimpressed eyebrow raise. “Isn’t this that century-old book series?”

George tried to snatch the book, but the taller boy held it over him with a smirk. He even stood on his tippy toes when George started jumping in a desperate attempt to take it back.

“Give it back!”

“Why are you reading a boring old book when everyone’s hanging out at the beach right now?”

“Why are you bothering me instead of hanging out with *them*?” he countered.

With a pout, George crossed his arms and fixed his intense stare on the book that was so far from his reach. When he noticed it tremble, his eyes widened, and he lost his focus. He looked back at

Dream to see if he had noticed, but he seemed too distracted observing George with a curious gaze.

After briefly contemplating the question, Dream tossed his book back. George scrambled to catch it and then hugged it like it was his most treasured item.

“You’re more interesting,” Dream responded while plopping down next to the spot George had just been sitting on. Then he looked up at him with a suspicious smile and patted the spot.

As he sat down, George maintained a distrustful gaze on Dream considering he looked like the type of guy who would jump him during recess at his old school. And seeing as his face was still covered by that stupid mask and George only knew him by a dumb nickname and a vague first name, George couldn’t trust that he wouldn’t try.

“Why are you wearing a mask?”

“It’s my superhero mask.”

George scoffed. “Superhero?”

“Yeah, you know, for when we grow older.”

He smiled and the way his crooked front tooth and abnormally sharp canines reflected the sunlight reminded him of his cousin’s hyperactive golden retriever.

“We’re gonna be superheroes like in those old comic books. There’s this one spider dude who uses webs to swing across the city to save people. I want to be like him one day!”

“I’ve never read them.”

“But you read *Harry Potter*?” Dream put his finger inside his mouth and made a gagging sound.

“Hey!” George frowned. He glimpsed at the book on his lap and ran his fingertips over the edge of the worn-down cover. “It’s a good book.”

“Whatever you say.” Dream giggled. “So what’s your class? I’m a Bio-E. You know, like Captain America? Or Slade,” he bragged with a proud grin and his chest puffed like it was the best news in the world. George wished he could feel that good about his own powers.

He pursed his lips and focused on the ground in front of him instead of Dream’s curious expression. If he told him, Dream would get scared and run away like everyone else had.

“Earth to George?”

“Are you sure you want to know?”

“Duh, idiot, why do you think I asked?” Dream wheezed again and leaned into George’s side, so close his head brushed his shoulder. George grimaced and scooted away. He didn’t quite like how unaware Dream seemed to be with personal space.

“So? What is it?”

“Psychic.”

Silence.

George winced. He curled his fingers around his necklace and felt the rock at his throat form as he

waited for Dream's inevitable look of horror.

But it never came. When he looked up, he could hardly believe what he saw.

His mask was off and hanging off the hook of his belt now. Light freckles were specked across the bridge of his nose and cheeks like flecks of paint. And his eyes—a fierce gold that matched the color of the surrounding nature. They glittered like emeralds in the sunlight with no trace of resentment or fear. He looked... in awe?

“You’re a Psychic? That’s insane! Can you fly? Do you teleport? I heard they can lift huge crowds of people and fly them out of burning buildings!”

George found himself giggling. His face tickled with warmth and a peculiar bout of confidence rose in his chest.

“Yes, no, no, and no. I don’t do any of that, but I can—” Glancing at the mask on his belt, he channeled his focus and then lifted his index finger. It floated in front of Dream’s face for a few seconds, albeit very shakily but it was still levitating.

Dream’s mouth fell agape, and he snatched the mask back and with pure, unfiltered excitement, he exclaimed, “Coooo!”

George’s confidence faltered, and it was replaced by apprehension. “You’re... not afraid?” His voice was barely a peep and he half-turned away but kept him in his peripheral. On instinct, his fingers reached up and traced the edges of the crystal around his neck.

“Why would I be afraid? You’re like the coolest person I’ve met. Plus—” he poked his side, and George yelped and jumped back from the ticklish sensation. “You’re so scrawny and small. I’d never be afraid of you!”

“Hey!” George exclaimed, though his expression was anything but negative. With tingling cheeks and a big smile, he said, “You’re the first person who hasn’t been scared to talk to me.”

“Well, those jerks are missing out then.” Dream’s crooked smile made George’s heart flutter as he remained in disbelief. The sentence that came next was the best he had ever heard. “We’re going to be great friends.”

He was ten when he met the annoying pyromaniac without a mute button.

They were playing manhunt: a game Dream had made up a few months before. As Dream swung along the branches of the trees, George scurried through the forest below, tripping over loose roots and barely catching himself. Adrenaline pumped through his veins. His heart hammered against his ribcage. His breaths came in short spurts.

“Come here, George!”

The tree branches rustled above him. The birds cawed and fled from the maniac tearing through their homes. Leaves rained around George. His rushed exhales matched the twigs crunching under him as his feet led him through gaps and over boulders on instinct like a deer flees from a wolf.

When he heard Dream drop on his heels, the shriek he let out echoed across the forest and alerted the wildlife miles away of the predator on the loose.

“Oh, George!”

George knew it was a matter of time before he got tackled. Dream was a flash on his feet. His movements were swift and elegant as he dodged every obstacle in his way. Meanwhile, George was struggling to avoid the rocks and branches obstructing his footing.

A short-breathed laugh and a smile escaped him when he spotted the flash of light from the edge of the forest line. He was so close. All he had to do was reach the cobblestone fence beside the dorm buildings. Only a few more steps.

He used the boulder near their tree to propel him forward, gaining the slightest lead on Dream which often proved to be useless. Not this time.

“Use your powers, George! It’s the only way you’ll make it.”

“No!”

The path to the fence came into view in between the bushes. Just as he made an aggressive turn to the right, he ran full force into another body. Both screamed as they tumbled onto the grass.

“What the—” George grumbled as he tried to raise himself after the fall. Behind him, an unfamiliar voice screeched like a wailing puppy and Dream cursed out.

When he looked back, Dream was hopping on one foot and struggling to take off his sweatshirt. The sweatshirt that was currently on fire.

George was so out of breath he couldn’t react to the hysterical scene he was witnessing. Dream managed to throw the sweatshirt on the ground and frantically stomped on it until the flames died.

“Dude, I’m so sorry. You were just running at me with this scary face. I thought you were going to eat me or something!” the newcomer exclaimed between cackles. He got on his feet and swiped the dirt and pebbles caught in the ridiculous white bandana tied around his raven hair.

“Who do you think you are? That was my favorite sweatshirt!” The voice sent George into a familiar panic. It was the one he heard every time somebody “accidentally” knocked his books over in the hallway or whispered about them while they ate lunch in the grand hallway near the headmaster’s office. He called it Nightmare.

“Dream!” George stumbled on his feet and put himself in between the two with his hands extended in front of him to prevent Dream from moving any closer. He wasn’t about to spend another day with Dream in detention for harassing a new kid. “It’s fine.”

“Yeah, bro, chill.” The boy gave a nervous laugh and took a step back.

Dream let out an unsmiling snicker and looked the boy up and down with a glare. Then he pulled George’s arms down and moved him aside. After pulling a few stray twigs from the shorter’s head, Dream turned back to the boy and George did the same. His cheeks warmed when he stepped in front of him like a shield and the back of Dream’s arm brushed against his.

“Who are you?” Dream asked.

“Sapnap,” The lanky boy with a distinct fire emblem on his t-shirt replied. “Uh, sorry about the sweatshirt and, uh, almost killing you and all.”

Dream scoffed. “Whatever. You couldn’t kill me if you tried.”

There was an awkward pause before George spoke. "I'm George, and this is my best friend Dream."

"Sweet. You have a nickname too?"

Dream snorted. He crossed his arms and tilted his head condescendingly. "Yeah, except mine doesn't suck."

"Mhm, sure," Sarnap challenged with a smirk and a daring glint in his eyes. "But it's definitely better than yours."

"Yours is dumb."

"You're dumb."

"And you guys are making my head hurt," George said. He rolled his eyes at the childish duo. To his misfortune, they didn't stop.

"Do they not teach you Elementals where to aim your crap?"

"Pfft. Typical Bios who think they're all that." Sarnap's dark eyes traced Dream with distrust. "What are you two anyway? Enhanced or Shifters?"

"I'm Enhanced." Dream's glaring confidence made Sarnap raise an eyebrow.

"You sound like one." His curious gaze landed on George. "What are you?"

George hugged himself and looked away, now feeling the need to remove himself from the conversation. The longer he took to say something, the more curious Sarnap appeared to look. Dream's arm falling over his shoulders and pulling him close took him by surprise.

"George's a Psychic," Dream announced.

"Psychic?" The boy's eyes widened. George worried for his reaction, but Dream seemed to feel the complete opposite.

"Yeah. Got a problem?"

"Woah, dude," Sarnap laughed. He raised his hands in defense. "Are you always this aggressive? I'm just surprised to meet a Psychic. Aren't y'all like locked in your own area?"

"Sometimes," George replied, "but they're letting me take classes with everyone else next year."

"Cool. What year are you guys?"

"I'm second. George is a third-year. You?"

"First. This place is so weird, but like, in a good way. There are like no parents, the view is epic, and we can use our powers without getting in trouble!"

George hugged himself at that. Although he had gotten used to hiding his powers and he wasn't exactly fond of them either, it didn't mean he didn't feel crestfallen when he heard guys like Sarnap speak with so much excitement.

"Wow, so you're a baby?" Dream said.

“Dude.” Sapnap huffed, but he paired it with a smile. “What were you guys doing that George body-slammed me?”

“Manhunt. It was my turn to hunt, so I was supposed to catch George before he reached the Bio dorms.”

“Can’t you like fly or something?”

George’s shy shake of his head made Sapnap’s eyebrows crease together. “What can you do then?”

He hesitated, but at the sight of Dream’s excited smile, he searched for an object on the ground nearby. Sapnap watched George with interest as he focused on the small rock by the bushes. Then, he swiped his finger and the rock went flying across the hill.

“Woah, I wish I could do that.” Then he paused. “Actually, no. I like having fire powers.”

Dream snickered. “Do you like burning people’s stuff with them too? Is that why your parents sent you here?”

The uncomfortable silence that followed made George shift on his spot. Sapnap lowered his chin. His hand rubbed his arm and his shoulders slumped like the comment had struck a chord.

When nobody said anything, Dream asked, “Do you want to play with us?” His voice was softer this time, likely feeling bad for making the comment.

Sapnap’s face brightened at the invitation. He hopped forward on both feet like he was ready to begin. “Dude, yes! Who’s hunting?”

Dream exchanged glances with them and then a sly smile took over. “How about you two hunt and I run?”

“You sure you can take us both?” Sapnap stepped next to George and bumped him with his shoulder like he was insinuating they were good at the game. George wasn’t sure how good Sapnap would be, but he certainly wasn’t great at hunting Dream. The guy was practically impossible to catch.

Dream’s smile didn’t leave his face when he replied, “Bet.”

“WOOOOO! GO DREAM!”

Sapnap’s obnoxious screeching made George’s ears bleed. It didn’t help that the stadium was packed with overexcited kids and teenagers. He shuffled back on the metal bleacher to let Bad (their oldest friend and the newest addition to what Dream had arrogantly dubbed the “Dream Team”) squeeze in front of him to plop down on his other side.

“Is that… popcorn?” George’s nose wrinkled at the scent of oversalted popcorn. An odd sensation churned in his stomach, and he blamed it on the overpowering smell and earsplitting crowd.

“Where did you even get that?”

“Geppy set up a popcorn stand,” Bad replied before chomping down on a handful of popcorn with a big smile.

George peeked over his shoulder at said Aeromental who was standing by the field wearing a red

and white striped apron with a white hat. He seemed to be operating a whole popcorn machine to sell undersized bags to the students.

As expected, one of their teachers was already marching toward him seeing as monetary transactions on school premises were prohibited—not that Skeppy cared about following the rules. On the contrary, his hobbies pertained to setting off the fire sprinklers when the Pyros were training their fire-bending skills at the gym, swapping the shifters' specialized suits for fake ones that led to one too many streaking sessions, and who knows what other pranks the guy had up his sleeve.

Once, he had teamed up with Sapnap to start a bonfire at midnight and convinced a group of first-years to join their ancient church and “offer their most prized possessions to summon the legendary flying spaghetti monster” (whatever that meant).

“And you didn’t scold him for it?”

George’s raised eyebrow made Bad freeze with his chipmunk cheeks full of popcorn. He blinked “innocently” at his friend, and his glasses proceeded to very slowly slide down the bridge of his nose.

Bad was the kind of guy to write lengthy apology letters explaining the flying spaghetti monster was not, in fact, a real god to every single first-year Skeppy and Sapnap fooled and offer muffins to the teachers to apologize for Skeppy recruiting Aquas to set up a pool party in their classrooms. Thus, it was surprising to hear he hadn’t yet told off Skeppy for his latest roguery.

“I haven’t had popcorn in weeks. The vending machines have been broken for over a month, okay?”

“Mhm.” George snickered and shook his head.

“Hand some over, Bad.” Sapnap bent over and invaded George’s personal bubble, making him do a double-take and nearly topple backward.

“Woah.” Sapnap steadied him with one hand while taking a handful of popcorn with his other. With a mouthful, he mumbled, “Formh a Psymchic youm havemh reallym badm balancemh.”

George rolled his eyes and muttered, “Shut up,” and then turned toward the expansive training field in front of them.

There were two grey metal platforms from where the obstacle courses were supposed to rise sat beside each other. At the end of each path, there was a platform marked with a finish line. With the ceiling of the stadium open for the competition, the sunbeams filled the area with natural lighting. A pleasant Spring breeze sprung through the excited chit-chat of the hundreds of students surrounding the arena. A strange sensation tickled at the tips of his fingers and a nervous thrill caused his heart to beat faster.

“There he is!” Sapnap pointed to the arena.

From the entrance on the right, Dream strolled into the arena dressed in his Bio-E suit: a black and lime long-sleeve costume with the crest of a throwing star at the belt. His white smiley-face mask was hooked at the hip. In the front row, a group of first and second-year girls screeched with excitement and raised posters with hearts and compliments written all over them. Sapnap broke into cheers again (which sounded much louder than the girls). The boy in the row in front of them turned to send them a weird look to which George responded with an embarrassed shrug.

However, he got over it as soon as Dream turned to the crowd and waved his hand, sporting his signature toothy half-grin. George raised their own poster over his head and joined Bad and Sapnap in cheering for their best friend.

Dream's eyes searched the crowd until they locked onto George, and he waved excitedly at the sight of his best friend.

On the other side of the arena, the second Bio-E student emerged—a guy a year above Dream with bright pink hair pulled back into a braid and a half-pig mask with two canines protruding at the ends atop his head. George wasn't sure why all the Bio-E students were obsessed with masks, but it certainly made their competitions extra theatrical.

The guy in front of them stood up and waved his own poster while another chorus of cheers burst through the audience. The fangirls in the front row cheered just as loud for Techno as they did for Dream.

"Imagine being a simp." Sapnap cackled while smacking his thigh and took another handful of popcorn from Bad.

"Do you even have to imagine, Sapnap?"

"You've been simping for Dream since before I even met y'all so shut it."

"Don't fight you muffin heads. Let's just send all our good vibes to Dream."

The guy in front of them scoffed. Sapnap grimaced. A flame erupted in George's stomach. Before he could think to stop him, Sapnap asked, "Dude, you got a problem with that?"

It took the guy a moment to realize the remark was directed at him, but when he did, he eyed them with a half-sneer, his twitching fox ears poking out of his head of ginger hair and making his fedora shift. With his thick Dutch accent, he replied, "Techno's obviously gonna kick Dream's ass."

"Oh, come on, you don't know what you're talking about, furry."

"It's Fundy for you." He gave him a once-over. "Aren't you that arsonist who's always setting plants in the building on fire?"

Sapnap fumed at that. He tried to raise himself from his seat, but George's hand on his shoulder kept him down. "At least my powers are actually useful," he replied.

Fundy responded with an exaggerated laugh and slapped the spot next to him like it was the funniest joke in the world. The fire at the pit of George's stomach burned hotter. His grip on Sapnap's shoulder tightened. Their eyes met. Sapnap sighed and started to back off.

"Everyone knows fire types are a joke. You guys are practically useless against a bucket of water."

Sapnap snarled. "Oh, yeah? Well shifters are—"

"Guys, it's starting!" Bad, who seemed unaware of the ongoing quarrel, elbowed George and alternated glances between the competitors in the arena and Skeppy who was being scolded by one of the teachers below.

"Welcome to the annual Bio-Enhanced and Shifter Championship! We have so many surprises set up for you all today, so I hope you're excited to see them. Let's give a round of applause to all of our amazing competitors for today."

Shouts and whistles erupted across the bleachers. A few groups started a wave that dissipated as soon as the woman's cheery voice returned. "Please stay in your seats during each performance and refrain from using any abilities outside the training area, including but not limited to throwing fireballs at the contestants, flooding the seats, and/or setting off tornadoes in the field."

Sapnap laughed. "Skeppy outdid himself with that one."

George giggled when he remembered the incident a few years ago when a group of Aeros set off a tornado that launched both contestants off the field mid-competition.

"And with that, let's introduce our first round of competitors for the day!"

The three boys jumped to their feet like the rest of the crowd, raising their posters and throwing out cheers. Dream's head snapped toward them. Their eyes met once again.

His intestines folded in his stomach like they were urging him to regurgitate his lunch. It was a foreign sensation, so abrupt that George wondered if it was even his. He swallowed the rock at his throat. His mouth was dry.

It was gone as soon as Dream looked away. He unhooked his mask and placed it over his face.

George's body tensed, and his breathing got harder. Was that... did he just... his powers?

Sapnap's elbow to his ribs snapped him out of it.

"Ow, what the hell?"

"I asked what you think Dream's time will be but you were too busy checking him out."

His face warmed. "I wasn't checking him out."

Sapnap looked unconvinced. George was glad the spokesperson interrupted before Sapnap could comment on the subject any further.

"On the left, we have our daredevil in his pig mask and a crown fit for a king, our year eight contestant, Technobladaade!"

Sapnap huffed at the sound of the crowd erupting into cheers. Fundy whistled and shouted, "BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD," along with a few others around him.

"On the right, we have our cunning jokester with his white mask and dashing looks, our year seven contestant, Dreeeeam!"

"YESSS! GO DREAM!"

"SHOW US WHAT YOU GOT YOU MUFFIN!"

George whistled and clapped his hands with a huge beam. Dream's smile widened below his mask and he set his sight on the path in front of him.

"These two Bio-Enhanced students will compete in one of our most challenging parkour courses yet. The course will require the competitors to use their swiftness, quick-thinking, agility, and physical strength to reach the finish line in the shortest amount of time. The winner will move on to the second round and will potentially compete in the finals to see who takes this year's crown!"

"Dream is going to kill it. I know he will!" said Sapnap.

“Don’t jinx it,” Bad replied.

“Let’s take a look at this year’s course.”

The platforms opened up and rose to reveal two identical obstacle courses in front of each of them. They were divided into three sections.

The first had a series of hanging hoops leading to a bouldering wall that was angled toward the contestants. The second was a bar George assumed they were meant to swing off of onto a pole a few meters away. How they were supposed to land on a pole smaller than their feet? He could only wonder. Though the worst part seemed to be the wall with huge spikes punching out at different levels in random order. The third section had a huge wheel with a hole wide enough to fit someone’s torso that was spinning at a semi-rapid pace. On the other side was a trampoline at the bottom with three ropes hanging above it that led to the winner’s platform. All across the bottom of the course was a pit of mud that would disqualify any contestant that fell in.

“We’ll give the contestants a minute to think on their strategies.”

“Woah, *dude*—” Sapnap was left with his mouth hanging open in a similar matter to how George felt.

“How are they going to get through *that*?” Bad squeaked.

George peeked back at Dream. Although his mask was concealing the majority of his face, his worry was obvious in the way his shoulders were perched high and back and his fists were repeatedly clenching and unclenching at his sides. The nervous swirl in George’s stomach returned with a kick the moment he fixed his focus on Dream, and the world swiveled around him once he realized what was happening.

Although empathy was a potential ability for Psychics, Sarah had told him most of them never reached that stage—possessing telekinesis as their sole power. Telepathy was the next rarest ability. George was only aware of one telepath during his time at AGE: some girl a few years ahead of him who had been sent away during his first year after she had lost control, wrecked a classroom, and almost killed a classmate.

As the outcome of this revelation dawned on him, he felt sicker by the second. Dream’s anxiety only ramped up his own.

Sarah had told him it was unlikely he would ever develop an ability past telekinesis. The test they had done on him during his first year which, she had explained, was generally accurate in predicting the range of an Extramundane’s abilities had returned inconclusive. She had explained that it meant his power level was likely below the average Psychic. She had promised him there was nothing to worry about. She had promised he would be out of the island by the time he reached sixteen, the age an EM’s abilities generally stopped developing. She had promised he would get back to living a normal life with his parents like he had always wished.

Sarah had promised.

“Okay, contestants. Please step toward the starting line. The race is about to begin. Fastest one to finish the course gets to move onto the second round.”

With all the panicked thoughts riling George’s mind, the shouts and cheers around him turned into background noise. Beside him, Bad yelped when his bag popped and popcorn exploded all over them.

“What in the world?”

He couldn't drive his focus away from Dream—his shoulders straight, his front palm planted on the ground, his foot behind him rooted firm and ready for a head start. George's breathing turned hard and fast and came in short bursts as he attempted to calm himself.

“Three.”

Needles pricked at the skin of the palm he had set against the chilling metal bench. Yet his neck was also hot and heavy with perspiration dripping down his back.

“Two.”

A spurt of adrenaline rushed through him. All across his body, his muscles tightened like he was in an out-of-control vehicle, and he was readying for impact.

“One.”

He couldn't tell his emotions apart from Dream's.

“George?”

“GO!”

The link broke at the sound of Sapnap's voice. George exhaled like he had just emerged from underwater. Sapnap looked confused as he watched George try to get his breathing back to normal. “You okay?”

George rubbed the sweat off the back of his neck and turned back to Dream who had reached the bouldering wall in less than thirty seconds, same as Techno beside him.

“Fine,” he mumbled out of breath, but Sapnap didn't look convinced.

Dream gripped the top ledge and pulled himself up like he was made of air. The soles of his shoes glided across the platform. In less than five seconds, he was off the ground again. His arms were in the air and his hands were clutching the hoop above him. Techno was hot on his trail.

He swung two times and then released his grasp. His front foot barely landed on the pole and his back foot was only half on it. While Techno was already working through the punching spikes, his feet quickly and cautiously moving in front of each other while jumping and ducking over and under the spikes as they came, Dream stopped.

George's eyes widened. “What is he doing?”

“He's wasting time!” said Sapnap.

“Dream always has a plan,” Bad assured.

And a plan he had. He backed up to gain momentum and then dashed forward at full speed. But instead of running through the spikes like Techno, his arms went over his head, his torso bent forward and down, his hands gripped the pole, his feet lifted off the ground and he performed a backflip that propelled him onto the spike on the highest level. He used it to his advantage and hopped onto each spike as they punched out and reached the end of the second section a few seconds ahead of Techno.

“He's insane!” Sapnap shouted just as the crowd went wild.

Dream waited for the hole on the wheel to come around before surging through like an arrow at full speed and using his hands to push him to his feet at the trampoline. Techno was barely coming through the wheel when Dream began bouncing toward the first rope.

Unfortunately, Techno managed some momentum-driven backflip that helped him skip the trampoline and catch onto the rope in a single hop. He was already halfway up the first and about to grab the next.

When Dream noticed his opponent so close to the finish line, instead of grabbing the next rope, he threw his body back and began to swing forward and backward.

“There’s no way he’ll make that jump. It’s too far!”

“Shush, you muffin! He’ll make it!”

George clenched his fists. The tornado in his stomach returned, though it wasn’t Dream’s this time.

Just as Techno reached the final rope, Dream released his grip on the first.

Time froze. His body flew toward the platform in frames. George’s eyes followed him as he moved, and he was almost tempted to use his telekinesis to give him that extra push. But he didn’t.

His fingers barely gripped the edge of the platform, but one of his hands slipped. In a panic, he barely managed to hold his own weight with one arm. He lifted himself high enough to grab the ledge again and then pulled himself up.

Unfortunately, in the time it had taken Dream to get on the platform, Techno was already running through the finish line and the crowd was going crazy screaming his name.

“He... lost,” Sapnap said. The three of them went still while the people around them jumped and cheered.

Fundy peered over his shoulder and laughed at them.

George frowned when he noticed the limp to Dream’s walk and the way his shoulders sagged and his chin pointed down.

“Congratulations to our first winner of today, Technoblade!”

Techno and Dream descended the stairs at the end of the course, removed their masks, and shook hands before heading to their respective arena doors. Dream gripped his mask at his side. Strands of his blonde hair were shrouding his face, so George couldn’t discern his expression, but the waves of disappointment and rage radiating from him were easy to catch.

He disappeared behind the door, and George’s own disappointment settled in his gut.

“We should find him,” Sapnap suggested.

Bad shook his head. “They won’t let us see him until the competition is over. Besides... maybe we should give him some space first.”

George’s mouth formed a flat line even as the next contestants walked into the arena. He paid no attention to the loudening crowd around them.

The rest of the competition lasted an eternity. George barely paid attention, but from what he gathered, Techno lost the second round and some guy from year thirteen won the whole

tournament.

When the competition ended, the swarm of students scrambling to exit the stadium drowned him, and he quickly lost sight of Bad and Sapnap. Once he managed to get outside and breathe in the fresh air, he began to search the crowd for familiar faces.

A girl with two pigtails chatting away with her friend. A teacher scolding a first year for setting a trash can on fire. The fox guy with the fedora walking toward him with a familiar Bio-E with a pig mask in hand.

“Oh, hey. You’re that guy who was cheering for the smiley face dude during the first round, right?” Fundy stopped in front of him before he could walk in the other direction.

“Uh, yeah, Dream.” George glimpsed at Techno whose scrutinizing gaze was unnerving. He shifted from one foot to the other and bit the inside of his lip, somehow feeling exposed.

“Say, aren’t you that Psychic-boy from my year?”

“Psychic?” Fundy looked taken aback.

George swallowed. “Yeah, I am. Have you, uh, seen Dream?”

Techno snorted and crossed his arms. “You mean the guy pretendin’ he’s not moping around in the locker room after losin’ to me first round? Yeah, I have. Guy needs to learn to take a loss by the looks of it. I told him he did great, and he *still* looked angry about it. Can you believe that?”

“That’s Dream for you,” George replied with an awkward snicker. “Um, where’s the locker room?”

“Don’t think non-competitors are allowed in there.”

“Oh.”

“But the back door is propped open because some Bio-E broke the handle by tryin’ to pull instead of push. What a fool.” His chuckle was dry. “But you didn’t hear that from me.”

George responded with a shy smile. “Thanks.”

“See ya around, Psychic-boy.” Techno patted George’s shoulder, and Fundy and him headed past him.

He snuck in through the back pretty easy considering most of the staff were busy redirecting the students to the main campus. It wasn’t until he was met with a long corridor that he realized he had no idea where the locker room was. He wandered through the eerily silent building until he caught the sensation of a strange yet familiar rumble in his stomach.

He turned right, and the muscles in his stomach grew tighter while his ears caught the ugly scraping of teeth against teeth in his mouth. He opened the door at the end of the third hallway.

Dream was sitting on a bench with his back to him. His elbows were pressed to his knees and the mop of hair that looked more brown than blonde under the dim lighting was shrouding his face.

The back of George’s mouth was stiff and his molars hurt from how tight they were grating against each other. He tried to relax his shoulders despite the relentless stiffness in his tendons.

“Calm down, Dream,” he said as he massaged the back of his own neck. “You still did amazing.

He only beat you by a few seconds.”

George’s heart flinched. Dream’s head jerked to the side. Their eyes met.

“You didn’t hear me come in?” George watched him through furrowed eyebrows. It was weird considering Dream was always bragging about his meta-human hearing.

He stayed standing for a moment too long, drowning in the swamp of frustration, failure, and regret inundating the room.

“You were great.”

“I lost.”

“So what?”

George joined him on the bench. Their shoulders touched as he sat down. Dream’s shame further asphyxiated him, so much his breath hitched at the intensity of his emotions.

He swallowed it down and said, “That’s one loss out of how many wins?”

“I lost.”

“And?”

Dream didn’t respond.

George pursed his lips. He grasped his fingers together and joined Dream in staring at the floor.

“You’re not always going to win everything.”

“This was the most important competition of the year. Coach chose me for a reason.” The sharpness of his tone slit across George like a blade. If his morale could bleed, it would be doing so now.

Although it was clear Dream’s disappointment stemmed from his ambition and high standards for himself, it hurt George to hear him dismiss his best friend’s words of affirmation like that.

“You can always compete next year.”

Dream jerked to his feet, and George flinched. “It was my chance to prove myself, George!”

When he caught sight of the ardent yellow stinging Dream’s eyes, George frowned and asked, “Prove yourself to who?”

With a groan, Dream swiped the hair above his eyes in a frustrated manner and paced in front of him.

George’s frown shifted into a grimace. He hated when Dream held back his true feelings like this—as if he thought George wasn’t capable of empathizing with him, as if all their years of friendship suddenly meant nothing.

“To who, Dream? To yourself? Why are you so insistent on being good at everything? It’s like you don’t even want to admit you have flaws. That you’re not always going to be perfect.”

“I’m not supposed to be like you!”

The beating organ in his chest twisted, and he lost his breath. His own anger and hurt replaced Dream's. With a sharp glare, he stood up.

All the anger in Dream's expression fell in an instant. "Wait, George, I didn't—"

"I'll let you cool down now."

He let the door slam shut behind him before Dream could think to pull him back.

"I'm sorry," was the first thing Dream said when George showed up at his tree clutching a book to his chest and with the intention of avoiding a certain blonde.

He almost turned on his heel and left. But despite the hurt lingering in his heart, he knew Dream cared too much to mean what he had said. Especially now as he suffocated in the shame and regret stinging the air around Dream, George understood.

He kept a foot's distance in between him when he slumped down against the trunk of the tree. His fingers ran through the pages of his latest fantasy novel.

"It's fine."

"It's not." Dream scooted closer to him, close enough that the back of their hands brushed against each other.

A boulder bore down on George's chest, and his feet sunk into the soil beneath him like the roots of a tree bury themselves in the Earth. He couldn't meet his eyes. Not when his guilt weighed so heavy on him.

"I'm serious." George's nail scraped at the loose root in between them. "I know you didn't mean it."

"That doesn't make it right."

George nodded, his lips pursed into a tight line. It was uncomfortable—the unfiltered heart spilling out of Dream. He had always been an expressive person, but now, with George's ability to sense every beat, to sink in his fervor, to *feel* him—it was intoxicating. It set off all kinds of alarms in his mind.

"George."

"What?"

"Look at me."

"I— I'd rather not."

"Why not?"

"Your emotions are too much."

"My emo—" He could sense his confusion. "Your powers?"

George nodded.

Shocked, he asked, “They’ve evolved?”

He nodded again.

“Have you told Sarah?”

“I haven’t gotten the time.”

“When?”

“Today during the competition. I could feel how nervous you were.”

After a moment, Dream let out a quiet chuckle. The weight on his chest slowly lifted until finally, George could breathe purely again.

“Is that better?”

George turned to Dream with a bewildered expression, and his voice was barely above a breath when he asked, “What did you do?”

“A guy in my class asked Coach how we could block empaths after he found out what some Psychics could do and we had a whole improvised lesson on it. Figured it could come in handy one day.” He smiled, and a strand of hair partially fell over his right eye.

The sun was setting in the back, and his hair was slowly descending into an earthy shade.

George smiled. “Thanks. That actually helps a lot.”

“When are you telling her?”

“... I don’t know if I will...”

“Why wouldn’t you? Isn’t it dangerous if you don’t?”

“I was supposed to be out of here next year when I turned sixteen. My parents were so excited.” George lowered his head. “But I guess that’s not going to happen now.” His fingers dug into the ground between them.

“It’s not all bad, at least. I’ll be here with you.”

He looked up in surprise. “You’re staying?”

“Yeah. I want to stay until I graduate. I convinced my parents.”

George shrugged. “Well, the difference is you get to go home and see them during breaks.”

“Maybe you’ll be able to eventually. When you get better.”

His voice cracked. An invisible object scratched at his throat. “But... what if I don’t? What if they send me away to another place?”

Dream’s reply was instant. “They won’t.”

“How do you know that?”

“I believe in you.”

A warmth spread through his stomach, and he burst into laughter. “That’s so cliché.”

Dream scoffed and elbowed his side. “What? It’s true!”

“Do you actually?”

“Yeah, you’ve been getting better at levitating stuff, and you’re really good at not using your powers outside of class. I don’t know how. If I was you, I’d be using them all the time.”

George scoffed. In a comfortable silence, they watched as the blend of colors ceased between the trees of the forest facing them.

“Are you feeling better, now? About losing?”

“I guess. I was just—” Dream shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m not really used to losing, you know? It made me really frustrated because it was in front of half the school this time.”

“I get it.”

“You really think I did good, though?”

“Mhm.”

“Oh, *really?*” Dream’s voice was teasing, and he bumped their shoulders, a familiar cocky expression returning. “Like how good?”

George rolled his eyes. “Good enough for you.”

“Admit it. You were really impressed!”

A grin escaped him as he replied, “I rate it a six out of ten. Max.”

“Oh, *come on now!* You know I did better than that. Didn’t you see how I like back-flipped through the middle part? I was like a super ninja. Been practicing that move for months.”

“It was alright.”

Dream wheezed, and he poked George on the stomach which made him flinch.

“Stop it.”

“Admit it.”

His threatening fingers made George respond, “Fine. You did amazing!” before he could tickle him. “Happy now?”

“Very.” Dream laughed and pulled back. “You think Sapnap’s asleep right now?”

“Probably. You know he loves taking his afternoon naps just so he can stay awake and pull off those stupid pranks in the middle of the night with Skeppy.”

“Wanna go wake him up with a bucket of water?”

George smiled and, pushing his current conundrum to the back of his head, he replied, “Let’s go.”

And for the first time that day, George immersed himself in the present as opposed to worrying about the implications of his growing powers. That would come later.

Right now, all he could focus on was laughing at Dream's goofy grin as they broke into the janitor's closet to steal a bucket, unaware of the unstable surge of energy waking in his mind.

Chapter End Notes

Update (as of 12/25/22):

The paperback version of Aether's Legacy is out [here](#)!

The awesome @WolfMangos on Twitter created a discord server for Aether's Legacy/Elysium if you would like to join [here](#)

my [tumblr](#) & [twitter](#)

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First things first, a disclaimer—this is an original universe that's been in the works for over six years now, so please don't depict it in other stories without my permission, it'd make me very sad :(

With that out of the way, this is my biggest story yet that I have all outlined out, and it's taken a lot of time and effort, so feedback, thoughts, theories, etc. are highly appreciated! I answer all my comments here, my Asks on my Tumblr, and any messages, so don't be shy, I don't bite!

\\(^o^)/

This story will be updated weekly on Sundays around afternoon/evening CT, and if there's any mishaps, delays, or announcements, they will be posted on my personal Tumblr [@lightns881](#), so follow me there if you'd like (I post other stuff as well)! It's going to be a novel-length story so strap yourselves in!

Thank you so much for reading! I can't wait to embark on this journey, and I really hope you enjoyed the first chapter!

Mucho cariño,
Light

Welcome to AGE: Part II

Chapter Notes

Thanks again [Grav](#) and [Winter](#) (@princodemeter and @yourlazykitkat) for being such great betas for this chapter! This story really wouldn't be the same without y'all <3

Edit (as of 03/29/22): This chapter has been revised for the printed copy

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George was seventeen when his worst fear came to life. It happened during a history exam.

The question on his paper read: *Who was the spokesperson for the first Extramundane movement before court in 202x?* He tried to concentrate, but he was acutely aware of his elbow pressed awkwardly against the arm of his desk. He clutched the hair at his forehead with one hand and gripped his pencil tight with the other.

His eyes traced the sentence repeatedly, but the words on the page turned into a scramble game in his head. It didn't matter how many times he read it; his attention was stolen by something else.

A cough from the back of the classroom. The teacher's expo marker squeaking against the whiteboard. The girl in front of him cracking her back against the chair. A boy cursing under his breath. A thought that wasn't his—

Man, I really hope Mr. Ferguson curves the test.

He looked up so fast his neck popped, and his eyes landed on the dark-haired girl in the front row—the one he had once had a crush on but who he had been too shy to talk to. With her eyebrows scrunched tight in concentration, she rolled her bottom lip between her teeth and circled another answer on her paper.

There's no way I'm gonna pass this.

Although the voice sounded like his own inside his head, he knew it was hers. It stirred a panic within him that made him rush through the rest of the test. He struggled to focus on his answers seeing as every few minutes, another foreign thought would invade his mind.

I really hope they have fried chicken for lunch today.

Why do we even have to learn this?

Stupid Carla's going to throw off the curve again.

He was the first to turn it in. Mr. Ferguson swiped through the test and eyed him skeptically like he was asking if he was sure. George responded with a nervous smile and then scrambled out of the room, clutching the strap of his backpack and gathering tears at the corners of his eyes. On the way to the exit of the classroom building, he bumped into Dream who was talking to two other Bio-E's from his year.

When Dream realized who it was, his eyes lit up, and he exclaimed, “George, you finished your test already? Wanna go grab a bite with us?”

It didn’t take long for Dream to notice the way George wiped his eyes and forced a smile. He evaded Dream’s puzzled gaze and instead shuffled past and muttered, “Not right now.”

Behind him, Dream muttered something inaudible to his friends and then rushed to catch up with him.

“Hey, are you okay?” he asked, and he reached forward and grazed his thumb against his wrist in a way that made his stomach do flips.

“I’m fine,” George mumbled while pulling his wrist to his chest and continuing down the hallway.

What aren’t you telling me?

“I said I’m fine, Dream.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

His entire body tensed up. The lone hallway caved in on him like a frigid void yearning for a life to take. As he turned slowly to face Dream, he pursed his lips tight and wished for it to be a nightmare. But it wasn’t.

Dream’s eyes bore into him.

You can hear me?

“Yes,” George replied with a breath of air that could hardly be considered a voice, but he knew Dream had heard him.

“Your powers?”

He hung his head low, and his eyes verged on tears when he squeezed them shut. He didn’t have to respond for Dream to understand.

“Dude, that’s hella cool. You’re never going to fail a test again.”

“Sapnap,” Bad responded with a testing glare.

There was two hours until curfew, and they were hiding at the corner tucked at the back of the library. The flickering light above them was dim. The ghosts of their academy’s past were framed on the walls surrounding them. The scent of dust, aged rosewood, and biblichor drowned the air.

Nobody but them came to this side of the library—full of worn-down history books and yellowing newspapers. They had found it two years ago during a late-night game of hide and seek and run-away-from-the-prefects.

George was on the couch with his elbows pressed against his knees and his gaze fixed on the floor as he contemplated what to do. Beside him, Dream had his hand resting on his back, and he was swaying his index finger back and forth in a comforting manner. His aura radiated a soothing essence that kept his mind at bay.

“I don’t get it. Isn’t it pretty cool to be the only Psychic in school with telepathy?”

“It’s not that simple, Sap,” said Bad. His eyes skimmed over George with concern. “Psychic powers are more delicate than other classes. That’s why they’re treated with so much caution.”

“But if you treat them like they’re a fucking nuclear reactor, doesn’t that just make Psychics feel like sh—”

“Sapnap.”

It was Dream who snapped at him this time, and Sapnap was quick to shut his mouth.

Yet George was aware that his words only rung with truth. It chipped at his soul every waking moment: every time strangers looked at him with *that* expression—like they were looking into the eyes of a monster.

It was silent as they regarded George, unsure of how to help and comfort him. But there was no helping him. Not when George knew there was only one way this would turn out.

He released a heavy sigh and lifted his chin. Outside on the window across the room, he could see the night was befalling them.

His throat was raspy and dry when he spoke again. “I need to tell her.”

“You do,” Dream said.

“But I don’t want to.”

Dream’s fingers stopped swaying. He pulled his hand down to hold onto George’s.

“You have to.”

George pursed his lips. He gripped the crystal on his neck so tight it almost seemed like he was aching for it to shatter.

“It doesn’t have to be a bad thing, George. If you treat it like it is, it will be.”

“Bad’s right. Look at the bright side.” Dream nudged his shoulder and his smile was almost contagious. “Now you can really tell when Sapnap’s lying about *accidentally* burning one of your books.”

“Hey!”

George chuckled. His friends’ auras warmed him up like a heater amid a Winter night. A faint smile appeared on his expression, but it fell as soon as the thought of his worst fear seized his mind.

“What if they put me back in individual learning?” He swallowed, and his voice cracked when he asked, “What if they send me away like they did that telepath years ago?”

In a hesitant tone, Dream replied, “If you don’t tell her, it might prove to them that you need it.”

They fell into another bout of silence as George processed his words. He was right. Keeping it to himself was only delaying the inevitable, and if they found out he had tried to hide it, they could use it against him. He would turn into a liability for AGE, and that would only ensure him a ticket straight into *that* hellish place.

In the back of his mind, a cold presence bound itself to his most dreadful nightmare. It entertained

the scenario like a sick daydream meant to inflict self-punishment. A part of him wondered if it was what he deserved—if there was a reason for why the universe had chosen him to crucify. He choked up at the thought, and he pushed it away in an instant.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll tell her.”

“This is unforeseen.”

Her eyes scanned the computer beside her. She swiveled in her chair, pointing her feet toward him, and glanced at the tablet on her lap.

The walls of her office were lined with portraits of waterfalls and flower prairies, and in other circumstances, the silence would have made for a serene ambience during moments of solace. Instead, it bore down on him like a hydraulic press crushing him from every side. Her expression remained unreadable, and his inability to predict what she was thinking made him feel like he was about to combust on the spot.

She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and looked up. She observed him for a moment, and just as George’s nerves were at their peak, she said, “We have to take another test.”

George clutched his gem and detracted his attention from her sharp gaze. He could hardly keep the tremor from his voice when he asked, “What will you do with the results? If you find something, I mean.” He struggled to take a breath. “Are you going to send me away?”

She put her tablet on her desk with a quiet sigh. The daunting decisiveness of metal against glass resounded in the room. He figured she was about to say something he wasn’t going to like.

“George.”

He peered back at her indistinct expression.

“Have you heard of Aether?”

The change of topic caught him off-guard. He pressed his back to the couch and repeated the name in his head, the sound of it ringing vaguely familiar in his memory. He believed he had heard it in passing from many of his history and literature teachers over the years, but nobody had explained what it meant, or if they had, he couldn’t remember.

“I don’t think so.”

She picked up the tea-cup beside her, crossed her legs, and directed her attention toward the portrait of their first headmaster. Her lips remained a thin line, and even though he had better control of his empathy, he couldn’t get a read on her.

“The Legend of Aether,” she started with a soft exhale. “One of the first Extramundanes that appeared a century and a half ago.” She took another breath, and her eyes returned to him. “The most powerful Psychic in history.”

He remembered now. His literature teacher had briefly mentioned her during their segment about urban legends.

“But I thought she wasn’t real?”

There was a second of hesitation before she replied, “Perhaps.”

Her finger tapped a sluggish beat on her thigh. “Back then, there was so much misinformation going around: lots of conspiracy theories and details covered up by the government. We can’t be certain.”

Gently, she picked up the handle of her cup and put it near her face, blowing a soft cloud of steam onto her glasses. She sipped the liquid for a moment too long, and when she drew it back, she said, “One thing for certain is: we know Psychics with her level of power aren’t out of the realm of reality.”

The words triggered a wave of dread over his body, and alarmed, he tried to say, “Are you saying I —” but his mouth dried up before he could finish.

“No, George. It’s unlikely you have even a fraction of the kind of power Aether was said to possess. Our abilities were different back then. I’m sure you’ve heard of the Energy Hierarchy theory in your biology class?”

He gave a hesitant nod, still tense but more intrigued by her words now. “The theory that Delta radiation is lost with every generation.”

Sarah nodded. She set her cup on her desk and clasped her hands over her lap. “Delta radiation is vital for an Extramundane’s biology. It’s why it powers us instead of bringing us harm like it does for regular people. But every time an EM passes down their genes, that energy is believed to dilute, and it determines the power level their child might possess, if their EM gene is active that is. It’s like adding water to a cup of tea.”

She stirred a spoon in her cup. The liquid rippled with disturbed creases.

“The more water you add, the less sweetness you’ll taste. It’s why the Extramundanes of the past were so powerful. Biological Shifters could morph into any creature. The Biologically Enhanced likely possessed the strength of a hundred men and could run at the speed of a race car. An Elemental’s powers were constantly evolving, and it was considered a normal part of their growth cycle.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“Psychics were the most powerful people to ever walk the earth.”

As he fiddled with his necklace, he pursed his lips and then asked, “What does this have to do with me?”

Her words were slow, and each one was uttered with excruciating caution. “The reason I bring this up is because Aether was an extremely powerful and unstable Psychic. Unlike other classes, a Psychic’s abilities derive directly from their mind. It’s why your class is so prone to instability. They say her own demise came about from her failure to accept her level of power. In other words, Aether lost control because she gave in to the fear of her own abilities and let them take control of her.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The only way your abilities would pose a true danger to you or anyone else is if you surrender your control instead of learning to control them.”

The tips of his fingers traced the sharp edges of his pendant.

“You say that like they have a life of their own,” he mumbled with a humorless snicker.

“Once in a lifetime, they might’ve. Now, we only deal with the residue of that living energy within us.”

George sighed and released his pendant. He pressed his palms against his lap and regarded her with a decisive stare. “What am I supposed to do to learn to control them? Haven’t I done enough already?”

“Acceptance is key. You need to get over your fear.”

He fixed his gaze on the teacup beside her. The rumbling fan behind her desk made the liquid open into wide circles that appeared and disappeared as they clashed into each other. There was something morbidly comedic about their lives—the way Psychics were expected to be unafraid of their own powers as if everyone didn’t already tiptoe around them like they were rabid animals on the verge of an attack. And although Sarah had only ever been kind and patient with him, he hated how vague her advice was, often answering his doubts with more perplexing riddles. He was growing sick of it.

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“Patience.”

He nodded, but his jaw was tight and his fists were clenched.

All she ever did was tell him it took time. He had already spent half of his time alive doing everything they told him to fix himself. How was he expected to remain patient when absolutely nothing had gotten any better?

While everyone around him smiled and celebrated their powers, they still turned around and told him he was better off hiding his. Since the first day his curse had manifested itself, all he had ever wished for was a cure to make him normal.

The hum of her fan seized the air with his lack of response. It taunted him—buzzing in his ears in an irritating manner that made him want to slam it against the wall with a swipe of his finger.

“Sometimes all it takes is reaching for an anchor amid your darkest moment.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s a saying commonly paired with Aether’s legend.” Her smile was obnoxiously unhelpful. “Food for thought.”

He tried to break down the phrase, but it appeared nothing more than an optimistic proverb made up by folklore passed down the generations. Useless.

“I’ll think about it.” He sat up and wiped his clammy palms on his jeans. “Can I go now?”

“Of course,” she replied while turning toward her computer. “I’ll have the nurse set up an appointment for your exam.”

He nodded and made his way to the door.

“I’ll see you next Sunday. Think about everything we talked about today and we will discuss your results next time.”

“Okay.”

He let the door shut behind him, locking away the implications behind their discussion.

In the back of his mind, he wondered if there was any possibility that her story could mean something. But he refused to entertain the thought.

A week later, he received news that his tests came out inconclusive. It didn't come as a surprise.

“Listen up, punks!” the Bio coach, Coach Harris, shouted while the students arranged themselves into lines of their respective classes.

Physical Abilities was, by far, his least favorite class, especially when it involved sharing the training field with other classes instead of individual training sessions or training sessions with the rest of the Psychics at AGE.

Across the field, Dream was laughing and talking to one of the girls in his row. Three lines to the right was the Pyromental's row where Sappnap looked like he was falling asleep standing. Meanwhile, Bad was in the group beside him with the Aquamentals, mouthing something and making faces at Skeppy who was two rows away.

George was stuck awkwardly standing by himself next to the Photomentals.

Considering PA was meant to train EMs on their abilities, it wasn't generally a mixed class, but thanks to some dumb new school regulation that was meant to have non-Bio classes being more active at the gym, Coach Harris was in charge of instructing a mixed class twice a month.

Thus, the Pyromentals would be pulled away from their fireproof rooms, the Geomentals would be taken in from the fields and greenhouse, and so on.

Meanwhile, here he was—outside of his confined underground training facility that had cameras and key card scanners in every room. At least the gym didn't feel as suffocating as his own training rooms.

Coach Harris prowled through the rows of students with his hands behind his back. His chin was high, and a stern frown was etched on his expression.

“One of you convinced me to include an activity you've always wanted to do,” he announced, rousing bewildered whispers and curious looks. George wasn't sure he liked the sound of it.

“Are we finally opening up an island and setting up a petting zoo with all the shifters?” Skeppy exclaimed.

A chorus of laughter echoed through the gym from everyone except the Bio-S row which was led by a certain cocky fox-hybrid.

One girl from the Pyromentals added, “Might as well add in gardening services with the Geos,” and a few kids from the Geomentals burst into argument.

“Settle down, everyone.”

The class quieted down as soon as Coach Harris used his losing-his-patience tone. He marched in front of each row, scrutinizing the line leaders with a glare that made every student stand a little

straighter.

“Today we’re having sparring matches between different classes.”

A wave of dread slashed through him. Chit-chat and gasps erupted across the room. He was glad he had a better grip on his empathy, otherwise the mixed emotions charging the room would’ve been too much.

“Is that even allowed?” a student called out.

It wasn’t—everyone knew that. Sparring matches between classes had been discontinued decades ago after the accident had occurred. George only knew vague details about it, but it was enough to help him understand why Psychics were especially hated by the student body and enough to make him avoid learning about it for fear of ending up as another hated name passed through hushed mumbles in the hallways of the institution for the generations to come.

“The headmaster gave us a thumbs up, so no need to worry about getting in trouble.”

He scanned the crowd in search of a suitable victim and paused at the line of Bio-E’s with a faint smile.

“Let’s start with Techno today.”

“Blood for the Blood God!” a few of the Techno fans cheered and whistled as the guy with the pink braid stepped forward, looking unfazed.

Someone shouted, “Put him up against Dream!” and the whole class began to chant the blonde’s name.

With a snort and a coy smile, Dream started to make his way toward the front until Coach Harris said, “No.”

The class fell silent. Bewildered, Dream backed away. Coach Harris skimmed the rows of students, and every line leader appeared like a deer in the headlights when they realized that someone other than Dream was going to have to fight Techno.

If there was anything that the Bio-E’s loved to do, it was talking. And thanks to the passing glances and quiet conversations circulating the hallways of AGE, even the other classes were aware of how brutal Techno and Dream were in their sparring matches. It seemed to be common knowledge that fighting either of them was practically a death sentence (or at the very least a lengthy trip to the nurse’s office).

The coach’s gaze passed over every leader until it landed on him. His whole body went stiff when he realized what was happening.

“George.”

Stunned faced and pitiful stares ignited the room. Sapnap and Bad’s concerned gazes followed George as he hesitantly stepped toward the front. Dream’s face was unreadable, and the rare sight only made his anxiety rise.

“Coach... I, um, don’t really do sparring,” George tried to quietly explain.

“You’re a Psychic, aren’t you, kid?” he replied with his arms crossed and a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah, but Psychics aren’t supposed to—”

“Then it’s settled.”

Coach Harris turned away and left George with his mouth agape and an appalled stare.

“I want to see what a Psychic can do against a skilled Bio-E. Go ahead. Step onto the ramp.”

Techno was the first to move, and George followed very hesitantly.

“Don’t worry, Psychic-boy. I won’t go easy on you for Coach’s sake, but I’ll try not to do any permanent damage,” Techno told him as they made their way up the stairs, and with his monotone voice, George couldn’t tell if he was joking or not.

Once they were on the ramp, an energy field in the shape of a dome enclosed the arena for the safety of the spectators. Unfortunately, that also meant George was trapped inside with Techno.

“You know the rules. No unfair plays. No killing or injuring major organs. All powers allowed. The first one to get the other off the ramp for more than three seconds wins.”

“You got this, George!” Sarnap clapped and wooed along with a few others.

“Technoblaade!” Fundy countered, and most of the class cheered with him.

They stood at opposite ends of the circle. Techno held his chin high and there was an aura of confidence surrounding him while George felt like he was stumbling about like a fish out of water. His anxiety triggered what felt like a vortex opening in his mind. Thoughts from every direction bombarded him at once.

Not now, he thought to himself as he kept his nervous gaze on Techno.

Damn, I feel bad for him.

“Three!”

He’s totally going to get his ass kicked.

“Two!”

Techno’s going to wipe the floor with him.

“One!”

Poor wimp doesn’t stand a chance.

“Go!”

With the eyes of a demon, Techno bolted toward him. George was barely able to avoid the first punch, but his feet were frozen beneath him, and he didn’t notice when the pink-braided beast swept his leg under him. George toppled onto his back with a pained groan. He rolled to the side before Techno could get a hold of him.

Can’t he just use his powers? What a dumbass!

Punch. Kick. Slap.

George crawled backward, scarcely avoiding every attack from above until he managed to stumble to his feet. Despite what Techno had said, George could tell he was holding back. And even with that, he could barely keep up with the directions he was aiming his punches and kicks. Techno's limbs slashed through the air like blades, and his braid swayed from side to side to the beat of his strikes.

How did Coach Harris expect him to match up against this guy? He had never been one of George's preferred teachers. He knew the man had especially grown to dislike George for no reason, but he hadn't realized his pettiness ranged this far.

If I was a Psychic, I'd be doing so much better than this guy.

George's eyebrows scrunched up, both in concentration and fear. Techno's fist connected with his shoulder with the force of a hammer and knocked him down again.

"Stop holding back, Techno!" Coach Harris demanded while clapping his hands. He circled the ramp and monitored the fight with sick amusement.

Bastard, George thought as he tried to catch his breath and avoid a few more of Techno's hits.

He's so done for.

I hope the nurse is free right now.

He might as well give up now.

Come on, George. You can do this.

The thought caught him by surprise, and when he got back on his feet, he narrowly slipped away from Techno's grasp. For a split second, he caught a glimpse of two yellow eyes fixed on him within the crowd.

Concentrate. Don't let him tire you out. Search for an opening and catch him by surprise.

Techno aimed another punch at his jaw, but instead of just dodging this time, George caught his arm and pulled it behind him. It caught Techno completely off-guard considering all George had been doing to this point was defense.

He's gonna try to back into you to knock you off the ramp.

Before Techno could put all his weight into backing into him, George released him and moved aside, causing Techno to lose his balance and fall on his back with a grunt, barely a meter from the boundary.

"Impressive." He stayed on the ground for a moment.

Use your powers.

"I was going easy on you at first. But since you seem to be hiding something up your sleeve..."

In the time it took George to process, Techno had already spun on the ground and caught George's foot between his ankles, pulling it back and bringing him down with a slam.

Use your powers.

Techno jumped to his feet and latched onto George's ankle to pull him toward the boundary.

It's the only way you'll win.

Techno sped up, gaining the momentum to launch him off the ramp.

George.

But Techno didn't expect the invisible force pulling him off his feet and hurling him off the ramp.

George's hand fell on his stomach again, and he bumped the back of his head on the ground, breathing hard and fast. He stayed lying on the ramp watching the ceiling lights multiply above him and listening to the loud thumping inside his ears.

When his hearing came back to focus, he could hear everybody's incessant cheering and Sapnap shouting his name.

Techno's head appeared above him. He almost scurried back on instinct, but his classmate laughed and offered him a hand.

"Easy there. It's over," he said and helped him to his feet. "Good job. Can't say I expected that from you, but you held up well."

"Thanks," George replied, still out of breath.

"Off the ramp, boys." Coach Harris called.

Both students turned to their peers and watched as they hollered and whistled. Techno let out a dry chuckle, patted him on the shoulder, and walked down the steps. George offered a shy wave to the crowd as he followed.

In the front row, he noticed Dream crossing his arms and sporting the faintest of smiles. When they locked eyes, George sensed the abrupt feeling of a nail scraping the inside of his stomach. But it was gone in an instant, quick enough that George wondered if he had imagined it.

Coach Harris' glare was sharp as George approached. When they shook hands, the man's grip was so strong it felt like he was trying to break it.

"Good job, kid,"

George nodded and pulled his hand back. He gave it a gentle massage while he made his way back to his spot. He caught a brief glance of Dream before the latter turned away again, and George wasn't sure what to think. On rare occasions when Dream's emotions were too intense to block out, George's empathy would catch hold of them. But the emotion he caught this time was different.

It didn't happen all the time, but every so often, the sickening feeling washed over him on its own—whenever Dream laughed a little too hard at Sapnap's joke or when he passed on their plans in favor of helping Bad with something or even sometimes when a girl caught Dream's attention in the hallway while in conversation with him. He never let himself dwell on the emotion for too long, as he preferred to push it to the back of his mind and busy himself with other thoughts.

From the spectrum of colors in Dream's aura, green was never one he had encountered. But why would Dream be feeling so jealous? And more importantly, why was he trying to hide it?

"George! You did so good!" Bad snuck over to him from his row while Coach Harris was distracted choosing his next two victims. "I'm so proud of you!"

“Yeah! You really kicked his ass there. Not even Dream managed to do that the last time they competed,” Sapnap added with a snicker as he surprised George from behind.

“Beginner’s luck,” Dream said with a teasing smile when he approached them. They didn’t break eye contact. “Great job.”

“Dream’s just jelly you beat Techno before him,” said Bad with a giggle.

“Shut up,” Dream replied in a dismissive tone and flicked a blonde hair off his forehead. “We’ve only been put against each other once and that was when I was like fourteen,” he argued, though it didn’t sound like he was explaining it to Bad with the way his stare was still fixed on George.

“Still lost,” Sapnap said.

“Whatever.” Dream rolled his eyes and broke eye contact, leaving George in a state of confusion.

Tilting his head, Bad asked, “You okay, George?”

“Huh?” George pulled his gaze away from Dream and glanced at Bad with a frown.

“You look a little out of it.”

He responded with a limp shrug and pursed lips. Massaging the side of his left arm, which was still sore from Techno tossing him around, he said, “That fight really took it out of me, I guess.”

“Aw, maybe you need some rest.” Bad placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder and smiled.

“Don’t worry. We’ll be out of here soon and then you can take a nap.”

“I guess.”

The students around them burst into cheers again. On the ramp, a Bio-S was in the middle of shifting back into their human form and raising their arms victoriously in the air.

“We should go back to our rows before Coach catches us,” Bad said.

George smiled at his friends, and his eyes locked onto Dream for a little longer than the other two. Dream stood there for a moment too, looking at him like he wanted to say something.

“Are you okay?” George asked.

“Yeah.” His smile was forced. “Never been better. I’ll catch you later.” He sent him a wink and then spun on his heel.

George peered at the back of his head as he retreated, and he attempted to gain a glimpse of what was on his mind, but the barrier he had built between them was harder to pull down than usual.

He turned away and tried not to think about the bizarre disconnection in their bond, no matter how heavy it weighed on his chest.

It’s fine, he reassured himself. It’s fine. Normal friends keep things from each other all the time. There’s nothing wrong with that.

But he couldn’t help the seed of doubt blooming within him.

A few months after turning eighteen, George could have never predicted the most dangerous adventure of his life would begin with the words: “I need you to help me carry seventy-two boxes of thin-crust pizza.”

Sapnap and George were bewildered by Skeppy’s greeting statement after he ran into them in the hallway at the end of the day. His hair was spiking up in many directions (more so than usual) and half his face was caked with suspicious white powder.

“What?” George asked, wondering if he had heard wrong.

“You guys need to help me take seventy-two pizzas from the kitchen into Bad’s dorm.” George had never heard Skeppy look so serious in his life.

“Why?” asked Sapnap.

Skeppy groaned and ran a frustrated hand through his hair, leaving streaks of white behind. “Look, will you guys help me or not?”

“Okay..?” was George’s hesitant reply. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to involve himself in the strange situation, but he figured they didn’t have anything better to do.

“Perfect!”

And that was exactly how it started.

“You’re telling me you spent a whole night baking all of these pizzas?” Sapnap dropped the last few boxes on the ground in front of Bad’s door.

“No, duh.” Skeppy stared at him like he was an idiot (which George would agree with). “What? Did you think the pizza guy was gonna travel across the Pacific to deliver them?”

“It’s the Atlantic,” George corrected.

“Same thing.” Skeppy put the last box down.

“How is this even a prank?” George added, a little too loudly it seemed because Skeppy shushed him and put a powdered-covered hand over his mouth.

George slapped it away with a look of horror and coughed out a little flour.

“It’s Bad’s nap time,” Skeppy explained while he scribbled something on a sticky note. Sapnap and George exchanged confused glances. “And Bad hates thin crust pizza.”

“Can’t he just like... throw it away?” Sapnap said.

Skeppy grinned. “He *hates* wasting food even more than he hates eating thin-crust pizza.”

“Okay, well, are we just gonna leave it here?”

“I’m going to—” Skeppy stuck the note on one of the pizza boxes. “And then—” He knocked. “Run!” He shoved them toward the corner of the hallway behind a couple of potted plants.

They settled behind them, and all three of their heads poked out to watch the door.

“Get your armpit off my head!”

“Get your head off my armpit!”

“Shut up!” Skeppy whisper-yelled and fixed his sight on the door.

Any second now...

Silence.

“Uh... maybe he didn’t hear it?” Sapnap suggested.

Skeppy groaned. He dashed toward the door, slammed his fist on it, and then rushed to take cover again.

“Here we go.” He sent them a wicked grin and rubbed his palms together like a mad genius.

More silence.

“Are you sure he’s there?” George finally asked.

“Bad never misses naptime!” Skeppy walked toward the door and tried the knob. When the door creaked open, the three glanced at each other in confusion and went inside.

“Hello?” George called out as they walked in. The blinds and black curtains were open, and the afternoon sunlight was spilling through and lighting up the tiny dorm.

Bad’s bed was neatly made and his decorative pillows were not a millimeter crooked. There was a picture frame on his bed stand with a selfie of Skeppy and Bad. It was tilted and out of focus, and it looked like it had been taken by surprise judging by the way Bad was reaching for the camera with comically wide eyes and Skeppy had that idiotic smile he had always reserved for Bad (Dream and Sapnap had bet on when *that* would turn into something more). Several motivational posters were hung around the room with phrases like, “It’s going to be a good day today!” and “Make sure to smile!”

“Oh no...” Skeppy said as he approached the bed.

“I know right.” Sapnap scrunched his nose. “Blueberry muffin-scented air freshener?” He put a finger in his mouth and gagged. “Disgusting.”

“No, not that. Look!” He pointed at the bed in horror.

George blinked. “Yeah, a clean and empty bed.” He laughed and replied with an exaggerated, “What a disgrace!”

“Dude.” Sapnap elbowed him. “What if he was abducted by aliens? Or worse... he turned into yet another victim of the flying spaghetti monster!” He fell to his knees and threw his hands up in desperation. “The horror!”

George cackled and slapped the back of Sapnap’s head. “Don’t be stupid. It was obviously the boogeyman. Remember that time he came to us crying saying he’d almost been dragged under his bed in his nightmare? I think it came true this time!”

Both of them burst into laughter, practically shedding tears as they brought up the various ridiculous scenarios in which Bad could’ve disappeared.

“This is serious! Horsey’s gone!”

“Horsey?” Sapnap managed between laughs. “Who the hell is Horsey?”

“Bad’s stuffed animal! He never takes that thing off his bed unless he’s leaving for break!”

“So? Maybe he left early? Exams are done and some people are leaving early for the summer.”

“Sucks that I’ll be stuck here by myself, bored as hell,” George muttered.

“Oh, suck it up! We already video call every day and play Minebuild together all the time. Admit it, would you even leave your house even if you were back in London?”

George pouted. He brought up a reasonable point, but it didn’t mean that he didn’t want to step out of his suffocating island once in a while. “It’d be nice to be out in the real world for the first time in ten years though.”

“Bad never leaves without saying goodbye,” Skeppy whispered as he put his hand on the bed with a distant and pensive gaze.

They stood in silence for a moment and watched Skeppy mope. Sapnap stepped closer, let out an understanding sigh, and patted his back. He opened his mouth like he was about to say some reassuring words.

“Sucks to suck.”

“Sapnap!” George smacked his shoulder but couldn’t contain his laughter.

“Ow!” Sapnap exclaimed and tried hitting him back.

Skeppy crossed his arms and ignored the two boys wrestling behind him. He examined the bed with a skeptical frown and kept silent for a moment. “This doesn’t make any sense.” He dashed toward Bad’s closet and opened it. All his clothing was still neatly hung up.

George grabbed Sapnap’s wrist to pause their fighting and asked, “He didn’t take his stuff?”

Skeppy opened up all his drawers and found that they were still full too.

“That’s weird,” Sapnap added. He pulled his wrists away and furrowed his eyebrows. “Why would he leave his stuff behind?”

“He didn’t.” Skeppy jerked around and ran both his hands through his hair in a panic. “He’s gone missing!”

Chapter End Notes

I honestly can’t thank y’all enough for all the support! I won’t go into as much detail here as I went in my thank you note on Tumblr, but I seriously didn’t expect the kind of response I received, much less for a story that blurs the lines between fanfiction and original. Y’all have no idea how much this really means to me. I’ve cried way too much this week alone from all your wonderful comments and support, and my best friends are probably tired of me rambling for hours over Skype about how happy I

feel!

This universe is so near and dear to my heart and to know a lot of y'all loved the world-building in my story means I've done my job as a writer. I appreciate each and every one of you, and I hope you're enjoying the story! We're about to kick off into high gear!

Again, your comments and Asks make this so unbelievably rewarding, so let me know what you think, whether on here or on either of my Tumblr blogs [@lightns881](#) or [@lightnswrites](#) !

Muchos abrazos,
Light

Operation: Mission Not Possible

Chapter Notes

This chapter is obviously brought to you by my fantastic betas [Grav](#) and [Winter](#)! What would I do without y'all? If you haven't read Grav's [the still point](#) yet, what are you even doing with your life? Go read both their stories!

Edit (as of 04/12/22): This chapter has been revised for the printed copy

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Woah, I need you guys to calm down," Dream said while tucking his training staff between his armpit and torso and gestured for them to slow down. He hadn't even gotten a chance to change out of his black and lime suit before they had ambushed him outside the training field—otherwise meaning his face was still glistening with sweat and his wet hair was parted to the side in a way that shouldn't have been as attractive as it was.

"One at a time."

"Bad's gone!" Skeppy shrieked, and George winced at the volume.

"What do you mean *gone*?"

"As in gone! Abra-cadabra he just went poof!" yelled Sapnap.

Dream blinked. "Oookay, Sappitus Nappitus..." He put his training staff down and leaned both hands on it, taking a moment to contemplate before raising both eyebrows and asking, "Have you looked all around campus?"

George opened his mouth to answer but closed it again when Skeppy started shouting.

"Of course we did! Do you think we'd be freaking out if we didn't?"

"Okay, uh..." George's eyes went wide when Dream's attention landed on him. "George?"

"I don't know," he admitted with a shrug. He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. It didn't make any sense. The next round of ferries didn't leave until the next day. There was no way Bad could've gone back to the mainland, and if he wasn't on campus, where else could he be? The rest of the island was off-limits, and Bad would never willingly break the rules. "He's just not here."

"How do you know?"

"I'm usually pretty good at detecting your auras but I just... felt nothing."

"You're sure his parents didn't pick him up?"

"His clothes are still here and Horsey's gone!" said Skeppy.

"Horsey?" Dream stared at him through furrowed eyebrows before shaking his head and

dismissing the detail. "Alright, look, first things first, you guys need to take a deep breath."

Skeppy and Sapnap both took in a really exaggerated breath while George stood awkwardly to the side.

They spent almost a minute not breathing until Dream groaned and said, "You can breathe out now."

They exhaled.

"Alright." He sent George a momentary glance, and George could tell he thought they were overreacting. Truthfully, George didn't know if the nervous feeling in his gut was his own or if he was getting caught in the crossfire of his friend's emotions.

What he did know was that Dream was the most level-headed out of all of them. If there was anyone who could keep his cool during a crisis and make a rational decision, it was him.

Clearing his throat, Dream raised his staff again and pointed toward campus. "Why don't we go talk to Monroe first to see if he knows anything? This is probably all just a big misunderstanding."

To their horror, it wasn't a misunderstanding.

"Yes. Bad and a few of your other classmates were removed from the island early this morning," the headmaster informed them while mindlessly scrolling through his cabinet files.

"What do you mean removed?" Dream and Skeppy asked simultaneously, the latter sounding more urgent.

"Removed," the headmaster repeated and closed the cabinet. As he took a seat at his desk, he slid his glasses up the bridge of his nose and opened the manilla folder he took out. He scanned the pages without so much as glancing at the four panicked students standing before him. "Your classmates were infected with a very contagious illness, so we had to transport them to a facility off the island immediately."

"To where!?" said Skeppy.

"When is he coming back?" said Dream.

"Is he okay?" said Sapnap.

Headmaster Monroe released a loud sigh and massaged his temples. He closed the folder and glanced up at them. "Calm down, boys. I'm afraid I cannot answer any of your questions at the moment. All information on the case is strictly classified."

"But we just want to know that our friend is okay." Dream walked up and set both hands on his desk. His stare was cold, but beneath it, George could tell he was starting to lose his temper. The headmaster narrowed his eyes, and his stern gaze alternated between Dream's hands on the desk and his face.

George took a step closer and put a hand on his shoulder. "Dream..." he muttered, nervously glancing between them. He didn't even get a chance to diffuse the situation, however.

Skeppy stepped beside Dream and slammed his hands on the desk, shouting out, "This is bullshit! I demand to know what's going on right now!"

George winced. If he was going to tell them anything before, he certainly wasn't going to now.

For a second, the headmaster looked appalled. He recovered quickly, however, and as he leaned back in his chair, he crossed his arms and sent them a hard look. "You are in no position to be making demands. I suggest you go calm down and wait for further news. I can't tell you anything right now."

"But you have to know something," Sapnap added, more desperately than threateningly.

"I'm sorry," he replied, but there was no compassion in his tone.

There was something strange about it, however, and as George continued to watch him, he attempted something he had never done outside of training. He honed his focus on his aura, letting it pull him through, and he probed his emotions. It was faint. He was good at keeping them at bay. But there was hesitation and worry and most significant of all—dishonesty.

As Dream pulled back, George's hand slipped off his shoulder and he lost his focus, breaking the link. Headmaster Monroe met his gaze. George's eyes widened. The outrage in his aura was obvious now.

"I suggest you leave now."

"We won't leave until you tell us something," Skeppy demanded and stood firm on his spot.

He narrowed his eyes and continued to glare at George. "Now."

Puzzled, Dream got one look at George's worried expression, and he understood. "Let's go, Skeppy. It's fine."

"What do you mean? It's not fi—"

"Let's. Go." Dream grabbed him by the arm and yanked him toward the door while Sapnap and George followed behind. As he turned back, George met the headmaster's glare one last time before shutting the door.

"What did you find?" Dream asked George the moment they reached their corner of the library.

"He was lying," George said. He slumped down on the couch and tapped his thigh nervously. He hadn't gotten deep enough to understand what he was lying about—whether it was about Bad's whereabouts or the reason he was missing. "I don't know which part, but he's hiding something. He's worried."

"Worried? There wouldn't be anything to be worried about if it wasn't serious, no?" Sapnap looked up in concern.

"See? We need to go back in there and demand the truth!" Skeppy exclaimed.

"No." Dream blocked Skeppy before he could think about walking off. He raised a finger in the way he usually did when he was contemplating something and then started pacing about. "If we do that, we risk him not telling us anything and keeping an eye on us."

"But we can't just sit here twiddling our thumbs. What if Bad's in danger?"

"We won't." Dream stopped and faced them. "We need to figure out what they know in secret. If

he says the students were sick with something, the nurses would know about it, wouldn't they?"

"So what? We steal their health records or something?" Sapnap said.

Dream snapped his fingers. "That's it."

He started pacing again, and George could almost visualize the gears turning in his head as he formulated a plan.

"While George and I do that, you and Skeppy search this place and find out if there are any records of this 'illness' he mentioned."

"How come do you guys get to go all *Mission Not Possible* and we have to sit here reading?" Sapnap pouted.

"George is a Psychic and I'm a Bio-E. Do you need a better explanation than that?" Dream said. Sapnap responded with a huff and hesitantly joined Skeppy who was already swiping through old newspapers.

"I have a bad feeling about this..." George muttered as they walked to the exit.

"It'll be fine. We'll get in and out really quick."

"No, not just this. I mean, like, everything," he said, though he wasn't sure he understood the words coming out of his own mouth.

He toyed with the gem at his neck. There was a strange tension expanding down his shoulders and back like a tight cord running through his muscles was winding up. As they made their way down the hallway, he felt a presence looming behind him, and when he looked back, expecting to see a shadow trailing them, the only shadow he saw was his own.

"It'll be okay. Let's just... calm down," Dream assured him, though he sounded nervous. George hoped it wasn't him unintentionally projecting his emotions.

When they reached the clinic on the first floor, they snuck into the janitor's closet and peeked through the door at the two nurses at the reception desk mindlessly chatting and typing on their computers.

"How do we get to that computer without them noticing?"

"Just give me a second. I'm thinking," Dream shushed him and squinted his eyes. He fixed his attention on one of them when she stood up to refill her coffee. She placed her mug in the coffee maker and continued talking while she waited for it to fill.

"Knock over the cup," Dream said.

"What?"

"Spill it on her."

"Why?"

"Just do it!"

George groaned and focused on the cup. He swiped his finger, and an invisible force pushed the mug off the coffee maker and it spilled all over her uniform pants.

She yelped. The glass mug shattered and left a puddle of steaming coffee on the floor. Cursing out, she rushed out of the room toward the restroom down the hallway.

“Alright, I’ll distract her. You get into that computer, find Bad’s record, and print it. Got it?”

With a nervous nod, he replied, “Got it.”

Dream slipped out of the closet and strolled into the infirmary with his hands in his pockets. Meanwhile, George hid beside the door and listened in.

“Jenna! Nice to see you again. How’s everything?”

“Dream, careful with the puddle!” Her heels clicked closer in a hurry. “We had a little accident.”

“I see. I was just—” He went silent.

“Dream? Are you okay?” She sounded concerned.

“Yeah, yeah, I just—” Another pause. “Feeling a bit dizzy is all. I think I went a little too hard during training. But I think I’ll just go eat something. I’m sure it’ll fix it.”

A strained breath. A chuckle. The squeaking of Dream’s shoes as he walked toward him.

One of Dream’s fortes was acting, although it wasn’t in the stage performing kind of way (he was terrible at that). His charisma and confidence allowed him to twirl people around his finger to influence them.

Her heels started clicking again. “Here, let’s get you checked out real quick. Just to make sure nothing’s wrong.”

“No, seriously, I should be—”

She clicked her tongue in disapproval. “Excuses! Come inside.”

The door shut. That was his cue.

Hurrying inside, he nearly slipped on the puddle of coffee and gripped the desk before he could lose his balance. When he got behind the computer, his hands trembled as he clicked on the mouse, and he thanked whatever gods for the screen being unlocked. He clicked through the programs, and when he found one that looked promising, he began typing Bad’s full name.

Something crashed inside the room, and George barely had enough time to duck before the door opened and Jenna walked out.

“Ow, hold on. I think I sprained my ankle getting off the bed!”

“Sprained your ankle?” She laughed, “Don’t be ridiculous, boy. I need to get back to—”

“OW!” he whined. “Please? Coach is going to murder me if I sprained my ankle before playoff season!”

“You have accelerated healing Dre—”

“Jenna!”

She groaned. “Fine. Let’s take a look.”

The door shut again. George released the breath he was holding. He jumped up and made sure the office was still empty before he finished typing Bad's name. When his record popped up, he grinned and scrolled down to print it.

Year of Birth: 2140

Blood Type: O-

Approval for Project Delta-Z? Confirmed

"Project Delta-Z?" he whispered to himself.

Jenna's shout from the other room snapped him out of it. "Dream! If you don't stop squirming, I'll twist your ankle myself. Do they not train you Bios to sit still for one second?"

"It's not our fault that most of us have ADHD!"

He pressed print. The printer came to life. Jenna's heels clicked in the other room. George swallowed.

"Hold on! Are you sure it's nothing? What if it's internal bleeding? What if I'm *dying*, doc!?"

The paper was halfway out.

"Don't be silly, boy."

The doorknob rattled.

"Are you sure!?"

The paper finished printing. George barely managed to click off the app and snatch the paper.

"Positive." Jenna walked out and froze when she found George standing in front of the door with his hands behind his back and a deer in the headlights expression.

"George?"

"Jenna," he responded with a nervous chuckle.

"Did you need something?"

"Um."

"Didn't you say you forgot when your next appointment with Dr. Reyes was?" Dream answered as he slipped next to him oh-so-casually.

"Yeah!" George glanced in between them quickly and started backing away, gripping the paper behind his back. "When is it again?"

"Tomorrow." She raised an eyebrow. "Sunday. The same day it's always been."

Dream hooked an arm around his shoulder and turned them opposite to the direction Jenna was turning so she wouldn't see the papers. They probably looked like a pair of awkward penguins glued at the hip.

"Silly George. Of course, it is! Don't worry, doc. I'll make sure he doesn't miss it. Ready to go,

George?”

“Y-yeah.” He laughed.

“Perfect. Have a great day, Jenna!”

With that, they shuffled back out of the infirmary and turned the corner, trying to contain their giggles when they realized what they had just pulled off.

“Boys...” Jenna muttered to herself before getting back to work.

“Did you find it?” Skeppy asked as soon as they returned.

He was standing over a table littered with yellowing newspaper clippings and 21st-century magazine titles.

George held up Bad’s file as a response.

“Yes!” Sapnap threw his arms up in celebration. “What does it say?”

“There’s nothing about any recent exams or any abnormal things during his last check-up,” George said and handed the file to Skeppy.

As Dream leaned on the table and skimmed over the papers, he hung his head and inhaled a deep breath. “But he’s been marked off for something called Project Delta-Z.”

“Project Delta-Z?”

“I don’t know about y’all, but that’s the weirdest name for an illness I’ve ever heard,” Sapnap commented, two fingers caressing the stubble on his chin like he was starting to suspect something.

“Did you find anything on weird program names like that?” George asked as he picked up a random newspaper clipping from the 20s that read, *Escaped Psychic Kills Police Officer Protecting Young Boy*. His stomach twisted. He dropped the paper.

“Actually.” Skeppy pulled one of the magazines on the table and scrolled through it. “I think I did.” He put it on the table and pointed at a news section.

“Wendy Reyes funds a private academy for young Extramundanes on an island off the Caribbean Coast,” Sapnap read aloud. “Bro, we already know that. What does this have to do with Project Delta-whatever?”

“Not that, dumbass.” Skeppy pointed at a line in the middle and started reading.

“Rumors of the creation of a government-run research program for the students have been circulating. Headmaster Reyes prohibited the government from intervening with the creation of any program. She had this to say about it: ‘I will not jeopardize the safety of my students in favor of lab-rat projects like the one my friends and I survived.’ Any information about AGE has now been closed off to the public to maintain the privacy of its students.”

“I’ve never heard the history teachers talk about this,” George said as he skimmed the rest of the article which threw out wild speculations about EM human weapons, EMs with impossible power levels, and an EM revolution on the rise.

“They’ve told us our founding headmaster didn’t want the government involved, and as far as I know, they never have been,” said Dream.

“Could that have changed? Monroe has only been around for, what, like seven years?” asked Sapnap.

“We shouldn’t assume.” Dream seemed conflicted. George wasn’t sure what to think. Although he didn’t want to assume the worst, he was still hung up on how worried Headmaster Monroe had been.

Dream took a step back. “Let’s keep looking through and see if we find something else.”

“But we’re wasting time!” Skeppy slapped his palms on the table, his face twisted with ruthless determination. George winced as a wave of alarm burst out of him.

“Then what do you suggest we do?” Sapnap asked.

“I don’t know! Raid the headmaster’s office? He has to be hiding something!”

“No.” Dream ran a frustrated hand through his hair. George could feel the panic radiating from him which could only mean that his mind block was starting to crumble, and he was more worried than he was letting on. “Not yet. If we don’t find anything else by tomorrow evening. We’ll consider it.”

Skeppy shoved some of the papers in frustration. Then he gripped the sides of the table and hung his head low. Slowly, his fingers relaxed and he nodded. “Fine.”

George knelt down to pick up a ripped magazine page in front of him. *Out-of-Control Psychic Fugitive Continues to Cause Chaos All Across the Country.*

A familiar image flashed in the back of his mind. *A white room. A grandfather clock. Shining eyes.*

A shattering sense of dread burst in his chest within the span of a second. His hands began to tremble, causing the paper to slip from his grip. He reached for the crystal at his neck and squeezed it tight.

“George?”

He glanced up at Dream who was regarding him with concern.

“I asked if you could help me search the school records for any missing or removed students.”

“Oh.” He let go of his pendant. “Yeah.”

“Are you okay?”

His whole body stiffened. His knees wobbled for a moment, and he had to clutch the chair nearest to him. His head throbbed, and the sensation of an impending doom engulfed him from the inside.

He needed to run.

He needed to get out.

What was wrong with him?

He squeezed his eyes tight and wished for everything to stop. For it to go away once and for all.

He had never wanted to be this way.

Dream put a hand on his shoulder. Warm waves of comfort hugged the air around him. George let himself indulge in his soothing aura—breathing in the air for four seconds and releasing it with one long exhale. He opened his eyes and was met with Dream’s gentle smile.

“It’ll be okay. We’ll find him.”

George could only nod.

After hours of searching, well past their curfew, they had still found nothing. There were flashlights set around the table seeing as the library lights had been turned off, and the only other lighting was coming from the half-moon peeking through the glass ceiling.

“We should call it a night,” Dream suggested when he and George finished scrolling through their seventh school record book.

“I can keep going,” Skeppy muttered while swiping through a newspaper. A few more dozen newspapers were piled next to him.

“We can’t be here all night. Let’s just pick up where we left tomorrow,” Sapnap said. Like the rest of them, he looked exhausted. His shoulders were slumped, there were bags under his eyes, and his bandana was sitting crooked on his unkempt hair.

With a groan, Skeppy threw the newspaper he was holding and cupped his face with his hands. It was a side of Skeppy they had never witnessed, and although George had known Bad was his best friend, with the way he treated everything like a joke, George hadn’t realized how much he cared for him. His distress was pressed heavy against George’s chest, and with how tired he felt, he could no longer block it out.

Dream’s eyes traced over him before he looked toward Skeppy and said, “We’re all tired and worried, Skeppy. We won’t get anything productive done like this. George’s starting to feel the effects too, and it won’t help any of us if he starts projecting on us because he’s too exhausted to handle his empathy. Let’s get some sleep and come back tomorrow.”

A moment passed before Skeppy responded, and when he did, it came out as a broken mumble—so unlike the energetic voice from that morning.

“Okay.”

They put the useless stuff away and left the important documents on the table before heading out of the library with the spare key Dream had snatched years ago.

They split off at the end of the hallway. Skeppy and Sapnap headed for the Elemental dorms on the opposite exit of the building while Dream and George headed toward the Bio and Psychic dorms.

The walk was slow, and they were silent the whole way through. Neither bothered to rush the little time they had left of the night together. As they strolled through the barren grand hallway, the white moonlight poured through the giant windows and cast their shadows on the wall to their right. The air was frigid and lonesome, and George couldn’t help but fall into a string of anxious thoughts—about where Bad could be, about the headmaster’s lie, about the uneasy presence stalking him.

Halfway down the hallway when they were about to reach the headmaster’s office, Dream halted.

George only noticed when he was a few steps ahead, and he looked back with raised eyebrows. He looked like he was intently focused on something.

“What is—”

George didn’t have time to finish the sentence, for, in a split second, Dream pinned him to one of the bricked pillars next to them. Dumbfounded, he opened his mouth, but Dream placed a hand over it before he could say a word.

“Someone’s coming,” he whispered, and George tensed at the feeling. Dream’s breath was warm in his ear and the high heat of his body (courtesy of one of his Bio-E traits) against him made the blood rush to his face.

The headmaster’s office burst open. Two voices emerged.

“I approved the project because I thought the program would take place here. I demand you bring the students back at once.”

“With all your respect, Monroe, we signed a contract. But don’t worry. I assure you the students are well taken care of. They’ll be back once the study is done without even a single bruise.”

“This is going against every school regulation. If even one student is hurt or worse—”

“I assure you, Monroe, the new facility in Washington is state-of-the-art.”

“Washington?” His furious tone made George flinch, and Dream glanced down, causing their noses to brush. He was frowning with concern, and George nodded to reassure him that he was fine.

Dream’s gaze softened and he focused on the conversation again. George had a harder time doing the same with the way Dream was pressing against him with his hand still covering his mouth and his other resting at his waist.

“You took them to a facility in *Washington*?” George’s eyes widened. If there was anything he had learned about the state in his history courses, it was that its past was tainted with a terrible history of Extramundane experimentation. “After everything that happened with the originals?”

“They’re safe,” the woman assured him. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to be back in Seattle by tomorrow morning.”

“Patel!” Their voices faded down the hallway.

It took a minute too long for the two of them to become aware of the intimate position they were holding after the headmaster and the woman were long gone. Dream pulled his hands off and jerked back, slamming against the pillar behind him as he did.

“Ow!” He massaged his elbow.

George masked his own embarrassment with a laugh. “Idiot.” He turned away before the moonlight could reveal how red his face had gotten.

After another silent pause, Dream muttered, “What are we going to do?”

It was rare to hear that crack in his voice. It scared George to know one of the most resolute and confident people in his life was feeling as lost as he did.

The chord winding in his muscles returned at full force. The headmaster's words turned into a jumbled mess of questions and anxious thoughts in his mind. All he knew for certain was that Bad was in trouble. He could've been crying himself to sleep in a glass cell at this second for all they knew.

George winced at the thought. Bad didn't deserve this. Out of every person in this school and his life, Bad had always been among the purest. Even back when his peers had still considered him a monster who would snap at any given moment, Bad had only ever treated him with compassion.

Along with Sapnap and Dream, he was his best friend. They couldn't leave him there, but at the same time, there was no way they could do anything to save him from the island—especially when even their bastard of a headmaster didn't have the guts to bring them back himself.

The knot at his throat tightened and he replied, "I don't know."

His dreams spoke to him that night.

A vast darkness stretched across his vision. The sensation of a presence watching him from the abyss grew with every breath. Indistinguishable murmurs echoed in his ear, inciting shivers like a herd of Harvestmen exploding across his skin.

It was there: that shadow looming over his shoulder like a herald of misery.

There was a flash—Dream laughing next to him as they looked onto a pretty lake amid a forest. The sun was falling and a swirl of warm colors mixed in between the trees like a vivid canvas with yellows and greens and oranges and pinks. He could see them all for the first time. He could feel them all.

And another—Sapnap elbowing him as they lied on the hood of a truck. An endless galaxy of stars spiraled around them. Splotches of white specks littered every part of his vision. And there was warmth there.

They were like fond memories he had never experienced.

Then there was the both of them, Dream and Sapnap, lying on the ground in a puddle of red. Dream's expression was engraved with pure and unbridled fear, the dark marks around his neck taunting him.

His own body was covered in red. His hands. His arms. No matter how hard he scrubbed, it wouldn't go away. Then the image fell apart.

There was laughter. Cold. Ruthless. Uncontrollable.

He was laughing.

He woke up hyperventilating. His heart was bursting through his ears. He tried to get off the bed, but his feet were entangled in the sheets and it sent him crashing down. He crawled to the trashcan and let his emotions spill through his mouth until his throat burned and his eyes itched.

The feeling of being watched didn't leave him for the rest of the morning.

“We have to go to Seattle.”

“Skeppy. How are we supposed to just drop everything and go? With no plan?” Dream answered with an exasperated sigh.

“We do have a plan. It’s going to Seattle and saving Bad.”

“That’s not a plan.” Dream buried his hands in his locks and turned away from them. His frustration drowned the room, and unfortunately for George, he was too focused on the situation at hand to keep their mind block up.

Seeing as he was always one to plan every detail and expect it to go his way, it was when things didn’t go as planned, when they hit a bump in the road or people didn’t act like he thought they should, that he fell into easy bouts of temper. These moments made it impossible for George to block him out, so he hated them as much as Dream did.

“I don’t know... I want to save Bad as much as you do, Skeppy, but I agree with Dream, it doesn’t sound like a good idea to leave without a plan.” Even Sapnap, who was always down for bad ideas, sounded unsure.

“If you really want to save Bad, the only way to do that is to go to Seattle.”

The serene ambiance of the library he loved now morphed into an uneasy silence. George rubbed the back of his neck and looked away from his friends. With how on edge he had felt since he awoke and with how tired he felt from not having slept that morning, it was difficult to come up with any useful ideas, so he resolved for staying quiet.

Sapnap stood up with a groan. “We don’t have another plan, Dream. Maybe he’s right.”

“We are *not* going to Seattle. End of story.” He didn’t turn, but his tone was hard and decisive. His emotions were absent again. George figured he had finally noticed he had forgotten to keep them in.

“Fine. If you want to stay and do *nothing* to save your friend, it’s *fine*. But we’re going to save Bad,” Skeppy snapped.

His attention shifted toward George, and it caught him by surprise. “George? Whose side are you on?”

As he looked in between them, he felt the urge to throw up. He had been avoiding that question. Although he desperately wanted to help his friend, going to Seattle meant escaping the island—it meant risking the freedom he had worked so hard to gain. How was he meant to choose between his friend and his future?

“Leave him alone,” Dream said. He turned to face him with his arms crossed. “Look. Let’s think about this logically. Say we do make a trip to Seattle. What are we going to do when we get there? We don’t exactly have a map, do we?”

“There’s a map of the old district where the first facility was in one of these books,” Skeppy replied as he searched their mess.

“How do you know it’s going to help?”

“It’s our only lead.”

“Even if we do find it, how will we get him out? How do we know they won’t just kidnap us too?”

“If we work together, they won’t be able to. Especially if they’re all just government civies with no powers.”

Dream’s brow was creased tight, and he was staring at Skeppy with sympathy. “There’s so much that could go wrong with this plan. Do you realize that?”

“And there’s so much that could go wrong if we don’t save Bad.” Skeppy slammed his fist on the table between them.

George was familiar with that quiver in his voice. He remembered hearing it in his mother’s voice when she had found out her only son was a freak of the most dangerous kind—that she would have to send him to an island away from society so he wouldn’t end up locked in a cell for life.

“Skeppy, it’s—”

“What would you do if it was George missing?”

Dream’s words faltered, and his arms fell limp at his sides. George’s breath hitched when Dream’s momentary shock broke through their mind block and struck him.

“Thought so.” Skeppy continued searching through the pages. “We’re going.”

Unable to handle the tension in the room, George muttered, “I need some fresh air,” and didn’t wait for an answer before rushing out of the library.

Maybe it was selfish of him, but he had spent most of his years longing for the day he could build a life without the constant reminder of his curse—one outside being labeled a threat, where he could blend into a crowd and where he didn’t have to worry about people in white suits barging in and stripping him of his humanity. As a kid, he had resented his invisibility among his peers, but now, it was all he wished for. Swarmed by his thoughts, he didn’t realize he had reached their tree until he was staring at the words carved into the bark.

Property of D + G

“Cheesy.” A voice chuckled behind him.

George looked to the side. “We were kids. What could you expect?”

Dream slumped against the trunk and looked up at him, patting the spot beside him with a faint smile. George snickered and dropped next to him. As he thumped the back of his head against the tree, he hugged his knees and fiddled with his pendant.

After a minute of gazing at the sky above the canopy of pine trees, Dream said, “This is a bad idea.”

A sunray snuck between the parting clouds and blinded them, making George squint. The summer heat blanketed their faces, and he felt keenly aware on the perspiration building on his hairline. He chewed on his lip and tasted the salt on it.

“It is.”

He held his crystal tight. When the sun retreated behind the clouds, he opened his eyes properly

and watched the sky. Maybe it was a cowardly dream, but it was often that George wished he could fly into the clouds and never return.

“We can’t let him go through with it.”

There was something enlaced between his words—something he was holding back. Despite what he had told Skeppy, George didn’t believe that Dream would refuse to go. He loved Bad as much as he did, and he was always one to throw himself into danger for his friends.

The hairs at the back of his neck stood, and the pressing herald of something malevolent waiting at the end of the tunnel returned. Every part of his body told him it was a terrible idea—that staying behind and hiding was the better option. But Bad was his friend and he was in trouble. He couldn’t watch his friends put themselves in danger while fear held him back.

“Maybe not.”

“Maybe?”

George turned to him. For the first time, he felt more confident than Dream looked in that moment. “Maybe it’s what we have to do.”

Dream murky eyes bore into his own. “There’s so much that could go wrong.”

“That’s true.”

“You still want to go?”

“No. But I’d do it for Bad.”

“I would too.”

“Then why are you so against the idea?”

Gulping, Dream turned away. Their mind block fell, and a wave of concern drowned George whole, making it hard to breathe.

“If you’re so worried about Bad, why don’t you want to go?” George repeated.

“It’s not him I’m worried about right now.”

They locked eyes again.

George furrowed his eyebrows. He couldn’t fully comprehend the meaning behind the emotion despite Dream wholly opening his heart for him to feel. His words were barely a breeze when he asked, “Why me?”

Dream snorted. He fiddled with a sapling blossoming on the ground beside him. “You haven’t been in the real world since you were eight, George. Why wouldn’t I be worried about you?”

George inhaled a small breath, and his voice was sharp when he asked, “You want me to stay?”

“You wouldn’t even if I asked.”

“You’re right.” George’s gaze fell upon the roots of the tree. “I’ll be fine.”

“Will you?”

The question left a bitter taste in his mouth. It wasn't just because of the patronizing implications behind it, but here Dream was claiming to be worried about him when their friend was missing.

"You said you believed in me, didn't you? A long time ago."

"I do, but..."

"But what?"

Dream exhaled a funny noise. It wasn't long before George realized he was laughing, and with a glare, he asked, "Why are you laughing?"

He shrugged, and his eyes were gleaming, and his smile might have been small but it reflected the scintillating giant peering from above.

"Nothing. It's just... I don't think I've ever seen you so determined and me so... hesitant, I guess. It's usually the opposite."

"Yeah..." George's brow unfurrowed and his aggravation wore down. As he looked away, a shadow of a smile escaped him. "I guess."

"Okay."

"Okay, what?"

When he didn't give an immediate answer, George glanced over, but Dream wasn't looking at him. His gaze was fixed on the line above the trees. The sunrays rained down on them and made the gold in his irises twinkle with hope like tiny flashlights.

"Let's go save Bad."

"The headmaster said you went to see him yesterday."

George rested his back against the chair and regarded her with a blank expression. "We did."

The fan rumbled in the background, and the curtains behind her desk swayed. Her coffee sat cold and untouched on the table next to her. She leaned forward and watched him through narrowed eyes.

"You and your friends?"

"We wanted to know where our friend was."

"Bad, right?" Her nails clicked on the keycaps of her computer. The curtains were drawn, making the room dimmer than usual with only a slimmer of light peeking through. It smelled of lavender—different from the usual cinnamon scent she used.

"He's missing."

"The headmaster let me know he was sick. I believe he told you?"

"He's *missing*," George enunciated. His gut twisted, and he tried not to let his anger show, but she wasn't taking him seriously.

“Is something wrong, George? You seem more...” *Aggressive*. “Tense.”

His jaw clenched when he heard her thought in his head, but he didn’t let it betray his voice. “My friend is missing and the headmaster’s doing nothing about it.”

“We don’t know he’s missing. The clinic informed us he was sick, along with some of your other classmates. There’s no conspiracy going on if that’s what you think.” She had the audacity to offer him a smile and pretend everything was fine.

George bit his tongue and said nothing.

“What I recommend is you take a few days to unload. I can tell this situation is stressing you, and it’s in your best interest that you don’t aggravate your—”

“My friend is missing and you want me to *unload*?” He stood rigid, his fists clenched at his sides.

Sarah looked stunned. It was the first time George had ever raised his voice like that. Her tone turned more stern. “You need to calm down. If you don’t, your powers—”

“Did you not hear what I said?” He marched toward the door.

“George,” she said before he could open it. He didn’t turn to look at her. “Have you been having any recent... difficulties handling your emotions? Any trouble with the negative ones in specific? Maybe *nightmares*, too?”

He gripped the handle. “My emotions are fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am.”

“I don’t suggest you try anything risky.” She knew. “Not with the way your abilities appear to be affecting you.”

She knew and she wasn’t going to stop him.

“I’m fine.”

“It could lead down a dangerous path.”

“My abilities are *fine*.”

“So, for your own well-being, I think you should let your friend’s situation resolve on its own time. You’re not in the best condition to handle precarious situations, especially if you’ve been struggling to control your powers. Even the slightest stressor could set you off.” Her words rung like knives scraping his eardrums.

George bit his lip. Hard. “I won’t.”

He left without another word. The door slammed shut behind him.

Y'all are so awesome, thanks so much for all the support! I hope y'all's holiday season goes fantastic! Wishing you the best! <3

Next chapter we'll finally be headed to the road (well ocean to begin with but something like that) so stay tuned, it's about to pick up. Let me know your thoughts in the comments, I love to read them! :D

Mis mejores deseos,
Light

[tumblr](#) & [twitter](#)

Sail to Puerto Rico

Chapter Notes

[Grav](#) and [Winter](#) are only some of the best writers in this fandom and I can't believe they're taking the time to beta for me so you should probably go follow and check them out!

Also, big news, you probably noticed a pretty new name next to mine right below the title, and I'm honestly still having a hard time believing it because I've never had anyone help me to this extent with my writing in my life, much less someone as amazing as them so everyone please welcome [Gra55](#) as my chief editor!

Grass ([@extragrassydetails](#) on Tumblr) is the editor and serial extra-detail-includer for Like Magic and Georgenotfound, Son of Poseidon, and the League of Minor Gods, both which are among the BEST dnf/mcyt fantasy AUs in the fandom that I've been a fan of for months now, and they were so kind so as to offer to help me with this story because as they so gracefully put it "Dude, you've been doing all of this WITHOUT having someone to vomit the plot to?!!!! Oh you poor thing, please, I'm here for you"

They're using up their precious time and skills to help make this story not a mess because I was carrying it on my back by myself and it was starting to crumble, so please, go subscribe, check out their works, follow them, and thank them! They're one of the best individuals I've had the pleasure of meeting in the mcyt writers community!

Edit (as of 05/17/22): This chapter has been revised for the printed copy

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was a warm day on the island as George sat on the back steps of the gazebo, watching as the sea foam advanced and retreated in the distance. Strips of sunlight peeked in between the parted clouds and paired with the fresh breeze of the ocean ahead, it welcomed him to a new adventure.

"Sapnap, I thought I told you to bring one bag," Dream groaned.

George glanced over his shoulder and snorted at the sight of Sapnap struggling to make his way up the front steps with a huge suitcase.

He dumped the suitcase on the highest step and rested his hands on his knees while he struggled to catch his breath. Then he wiped the sweat off his forehead, fixed the stray hairs sticking out of his bandana, and looked up at them with a toothy grin.

When he noticed Dream staring down at him with an unamused expression, Sapnap pouted, crossed his arms, and said, "It's all my *necessities*."

George scoffed, all too familiar with Sapnap's temper tantrums. He had once even set Dream's baton on fire after accusing him of cheating during a "friendly" match.

Dream pinched the bridge of his nose and inhaled a long breath. "Okay then."

He turned on his heel, pulled up the sleeves of his hoodie, and took out his tablet from his backpack. George wasn't sure how Dream could stand wearing that smiley-face hoodie during the summer. A part of him was certain he was mostly doing it because he knew George found it annoying.

"What's the plan, chief?" asked Sapnap.

Without looking up from his tablet, Dream replied, "The plan is to get to Puerto Rico bay and sneak into one of the cruise ships to Florida."

"Do you expect us to *swim* all the way to Puerto Rico?" George's sarcastic remark made Dream's serious expression shift into one of faint amusement.

"Sure thing," he replied.

"Can't you, like, fly us there?" Sapnap said.

"You know I can barely lift a boulder. How am I supposed to fly your fat arse out there?"

With a bemused smirk, Sapnap replied, "*George*, I had no idea you spent your time admiring my ass."

George huffed and stuck out his tongue to which Sapnap returned the gesture.

"You won't need to." Dream nodded toward the beach and led them down to the docks.

Although it was prohibited to leave the island unless it was on a registered vessel or the ferry that stopped by twice a day, the students were allowed to hang out by the docks. As such, George and his friends had always enjoyed stopping by to sit above the water and point out the occasional dolphin in the distance or fool around and splash water at each other. Winter sunsets were especially nice to sit through, and even though George couldn't fully experience the colorful horizon with his color blindness, he enjoyed it when Dream took down their mind block and he could steep in his pleasant aura.

Upon arriving at the docks, George frowned and asked, "Uh, what is that?"

"Our ride," Skeppy announced with a grin and gestured toward the old man who was idly leafing through a magazine while sitting at the driver's seat of a small motorboat. He was leaning back on his cushioned seat and chewing on a soggy sandwich half-wrapped in foil, enjoying the day as if he wasn't in the presence of four soon-to-be fugitive EMs talking about him within hearing range.

"Skeppy... I told you to get us a boat." Dream pointed in between the four of them. "*Us*."

"Yeah, I got us a ride!"

"How do you know he won't rat us out?" Sapnap asked.

"He won't." Skeppy stood akimbo, teeth glinting with confidence and the spikes of his hair swaying with the ocean breeze. "I'm paying him good."

"Alright. Whatever." Dream breathed out, holding onto the bridge of his nose like a father who regretted bringing his three kids on a road trip. "Everyone ready?"

He hurled his backpack onto the boat, and when he noticed Sapnap struggling to pick up his

suitcase, he wordlessly grabbed the handle with one hand and threw it in too.

“Show off,” Sapnap grumbled under his breath while climbing in behind Skeppy.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” George mumbled and jumped in.

“Are you sure you want to do this? You can still back out,” Dream whispered to him once everyone was settled in the boat and Skeppy was busy giving the man directions while Sapnap was patting down his pockets to check if he had forgotten anything.

It was terrifying—that he could admit. But it was also thrilling to know he was about to experience the world outside of the island for the first time in a decade, and he figured if he went in with a positive attitude and kept in control of his emotions, everything would turn out okay.

George responded with a nervous smile. “Yeah. Let’s go save Bad.”

Turns out, escaping from an island with superpowered staff wasn’t as difficult as it sounded. All you had to do was pay an old man with nothing better to do to take you to Puerto Rico with no questions asked.

Although a part of George was anxious about what came next, his friends looked certain that they would pull off the plan smoothly, and he found himself seeking comfort in their optimistic auras.

The salty breeze hitting his face as they drifted through the sea was soothing. The horizon ahead of them was spread vast and endless, and George could only wonder what awaited them behind it.

At one point, Dream leaned close and pointed out a pair of dolphins that were chasing each other in the distance, muttering a lame joke about it looking like them during manhunt. George laughed at it regardless, and Dream didn’t pull away the whole ride after that.

“Dude, I thought you said sneaking in would be easy? How are we supposed to get in *there*?” Sapnap pointed at the gigantic cruise ship parked at the dock. The sound of its echoing horn made George wince.

Crowds of people were exiting and entering, most of them dressed in summer clothes with tourist hats and huge beams as they made their way into the island to explore Puerto Rico’s wonders. There were several checkpoints with dozens of security and staff greeting the guests. Lines of baggage claim were set up at the sides, and with so many eyes zeroed in on the rush of guests, the task of sneaking in would prove to be impossible unless they had a Photo to turn them invisible.

“There’s no way we’re sneaking in there,” George said, sitting back on his chair and sipping his apple juice. They were at the outdoor patio of a cafe by the docks where Dream had brought them to study the points of entry of the cruise.

“We won’t be sneaking through the entrance.” Dream scanned the ship with a daring glint in his eyes.

George rolled his eyes at his undaunted confidence. Sometimes he wondered if Dream thought of himself as the main character in an action movie. Even so, George envied his self-assurance and the pride he held over his abilities—that kind of comfort with his body seemed unfathomable to George. Though he would drop dead before confessing how impressed he felt every time he

watched Dream perform his routine during Bio-E training season or every time he adopted his astute charm to let out a clever remark during class.

“Then what do you suggest we do, genius? Fly up there?” Skeppy said.

When Dream looked toward George, his devilish grin made him dread what he was about to propose next. Sapnap and Skeppy burst into laughter when they saw his face.

“Dream. You know I can’t carry you guys.”

Dream laughed and threw a fry in his mouth. Shaking his head with amusement, he said, “You won’t have to do it by yourself. Skeppy will help.”

Skeppy’s laughter cut off upon hearing that. “Skeppy will do what now?”

“During the night, before the ship takes off, you two are going to fly us up there.”

“Why do I have to carry Sapnap’s fat arse?”

Sapnap scoffed. “Dude, why are you always targeting me?”

“Why me? George is the Psychic here!”

“Children, children,” Dream exclaimed, interrupting George and Sapnap’s shouting match and Skeppy’s lengthy explanation about why it was a bad idea to have him help. “Look. *I’m* gonna climb up there first, secure the rope, and all *you two* have to do is make sure Sapnap and you don’t fall thirty feet into the ocean. It’s as easy as that.”

“Easy for you to say. Your life isn’t depending on these two idiots,” Sapnap muttered with a pout.

The three burst into argument again, and instead of bothering to silence them, Dream sat back to enjoy his fries, the ocean breeze, the seagulls gawking in the air, and his friends blabbering like little kids in a playground.

The plan turned out exactly as George expected—an utter mess.

When the sun descended and the entrances were closed in preparation for departure, they got their hands on what was likely some poor man’s fishing boat and rowed to the other side of the ship.

The boat creaked under their weight as they fought against the waves and slammed into the side of the cruise ship. Meanwhile, they scrambled to grab onto the sides of the boat to keep it from tipping over.

“Ready, spider-boy?” Sapnap asked as he hooked the rope onto Dream’s belt while Dream adjusted his mask over his face (because of course he had brought that stupid thing).

Dream flashed them a smile and two thumbs up. Then he looked up the side of the ship and asked, “Care to give me a boost, Skeppy?”

“Aye-aye, captain,” Skeppy said before raising both arms and shooting Dream upward with a gust of wind strong enough that Sapnap and George were knocked back into the boat.

Above them, Dream held onto the hem of one of the circular windows with one hand and lifted himself up to put his feet on the ledge and jump up to grab the next. He looked like a monkey

moving up from window to window with ease and occasionally looking down to boast before continuing to climb. Each time, George's anxiety spiked because even though Dream was good, his confidence got the best of him sometimes, and George wasn't sure he'd be able to catch him if he slipped up.

When Dream reached the railing, he secured the rope and sent it down. It was when Sapnap started his ascent that they ran into trouble. George was too concentrated on stabilizing Sapnap, who was holding his massive suitcase at his side, to notice the playful squeaks beside them.

"Uh, George?" Skeppy tapped his shoulder.

"Hold on—" George's hands trembled, and his head began to throb as he hyper-focused on holding Sapnap steady while he climbed the wall. "Trying to concentrate here."

"But George—"

"Be quiet and help me out here!" George narrowed his eyes, and his fingers began to tremble too. The headache he was getting from straining his mind was certainly not helping either. Sapnap was almost at the top where Dream was reaching his hand down to grab the suitcase.

"EeEeEe!"

"Skeppy, what the—" From the corner of his eye, he spotted the curious dolphins circling their boat. One of them slammed against it with an excited squeak, and the boat wobbled, making George's arm fly sideways. Sapnap let out a high-pitched shriek and clutched onto the rope that swung from side to side.

"GEORGE!"

The dolphins chanted in unison and continued to ram into their boat and jump around them. Their screeching made George's headache intensify, and he was hardly able to drown them out to focus on the rope.

"Get them away from here!"

"How am I supposed to do that?" Skeppy waved his arms in a panicked attempt to shoo them away.

"I don't know, just do something!"

"What's going on down there?" Dream's scream was barely audible with all the commotion.

When George failed to stabilize the rope with his telekinesis, he instead tried to reach for it, but it proved to be a mistake as one of the dolphins must have thought it was a toy and caught onto it before he could, yanking it down hard.

"Nononono—"

Sapnap screeched, and the suitcase slipped from his grasp when he clung to the rope for his dear life. It splashed into the ocean beside them and almost sent their boat toppling to the side, but Skeppy used the wind to keep them steady.

"The bag—" George tried to say, but it had already sunk beneath the water.

"Having— technical— difficulties here—" Skeppy groaned, and George turned his head enough

that he saw him wrestling one of the dolphins for his backpack.

“I swear if they take my stuff, I’m going to—” George spoke too soon, it seemed, as two of the dolphins rammed into them at the same time and flipped their boat, sending Skeppy and him into the ocean and their bags onto the hands (or snouts) of five mischievous thieves.

George resurfaced with a scowl and half of his hair obscuring his vision.

“Our stuff,” Skeppy exclaimed when he emerged from the water with a gasp and watched the dolphins circle around them with their bags and taunting squeaks.

“Come up here, now! Before we get caught,” Sapnap shouted, probably having reached the top with Dream’s help.

“That idiot is—”

“Forget it. Let’s go!” Skeppy grabbed onto George before evoking a whirlwind with enough force to shoot them into the air. However, not having had enough force to send them up to the railing, George let out a surprised peep and levitated them long enough for them to clutch the ledge and hang off the ship. The dolphins screeched below them like they were laughing.

“You guys are a mess.” Dream’s voice was strained from holding back his laughter, and he took George’s hand and pulled him up.

As he stared at the two drenched boys, he burst into wheezes, and George would’ve thought he was hyperventilating had he not been well-used to Dream’s kettle laughter. Skeppy and Sapnap were also struggling to breathe from their cackling.

“Why are you laughing?” George hissed. “They literally took our stuff.”

“That was the stupidest thing I’ve ever had to do,” Skeppy managed and coughed up some water. “And I’ve done a lot of stupid shit in my lifetime.”

“Our stuff is gone,” George repeated. “Those sneaky bas—”

“Way to lose all of our stuff, idiot,” Sapnap said with a laugh and slapped the back of his head.

“I wasn’t the one who dropped my suitcase because I was shrieking like a little girl.”

“Alright, calm down,” Dream managed in between laughs and put his arms in between them before they could start tussling. “I have enough money to last us in Florida, and it’s not like these rich people will miss a shirt or two.”

“Calm down?” George scoffed and gaped at him. “Why are you laughing? There’s no way you have enough—”

George hadn’t even noticed Dream drawing closer until his finger was pressed against his lips. The confidence dancing in his aura was reassuring and easy to sink into. There wasn’t a trace of worry in his mischievous gaze and shining smile. *Trust me*, the gold glint in his eyes said.

When Dream pulled back, George turned away to avoid the undeniable teasing that would incur over his warm face. Luckily, Skeppy and Sapnap were too busy checking out the ship to notice.

“How long until we get to Florida?” asked Skeppy.

“Tuesday. Hopefully before midday,” Dream responded.

“Dude, that’s like a day and a half from now. Where are we supposed to sleep?” asked Sapnap.

“We’ll make do,” Dream said as they headed down the hallway. “The ship is big enough for there to be some vacant rooms. We just need to find a housekeeping schedule.” He signaled toward a door that read *Staff Only*.

When George tried the knob and found it locked, he gave Dream an unimpressed eyebrow raise. “What do you suggest we do now, idiot?”

“Georgie.” Dream put a hand over his heart in mock offense. “Do you have that little faith in me?” With a smirk, he directed him a wink that made his face burn and then brushed past him into the next hallway.

George rolled his eyes to hide his embarrassment. Dream was a natural flirt and messing with him had always been one of his favorite past times.

As he rounded the corner, Dream gestured for them to stay put. He approached a cleaning lady who was dusting the furniture in the hallway and engaged her in a conversation. As he did, he shifted closer and ‘accidentally’ knocked something from her cart. When they both leaned down to get it, he reached into her pocket for a split second and slid her keycard into his sleeve. Then he bid her farewell and she continued pushing her cart in the opposite direction.

He strolled toward them with a dumb grin that elicited a glare from George, and when he stepped in front of him, slipped the keycard out of his sleeve like a magician, and gave a little bow with that stupid smug spark in his eyes, George huffed.

“Way to go, Dream.” Sapnap gave him a high five.

“I don’t know. There’s room for improvement,” Skeppy added with a smirk.

“Whatever. Give me that.” George snatched the card from Dream’s hand and unlocked the room.

On the other side of the door, there was a clipboard hanging, and as George scanned the page, Dream stepped behind him and leaned his chin on the top of his shoulder, causing every muscle in his body to tense. The fact that his body temperature had always run hotter than normal also wasn’t helping the situation.

“Looks like Room 356 is empty,” Dream said, but he didn’t attempt to back away, indicating that he knew exactly what he was doing. George could only guess how wide Dream’s grin looked right about now.

It wasn’t until Sapnap clapped his hands and announced, “Alright, boys, let’s go find our room,” that Dream finally stepped back. From the corner of his eye, George could see him eyeing him down with a mischievous smile, but instead of giving him the satisfaction of a reaction, George bit back the “idiot” remark at the tip of his tongue and followed Sapnap without another word.

The room was about the size of their dorms with two bunk beds at both corners and two closets on the other side. Moonlight poured from the circular window onto the welcome card on the nightstand below.

“Finally. Those dolphins really took it out of me,” Skeppy said as they settled into the room. The first thing they did was find towels and change into dry clothes.

“I call the bottom bunk.” Sapnap threw himself onto the bed on the right, spread his arms, and closed his eyes with a satisfied smile.

“Guess I’ll take the one above you.” Skeppy used a gush of wind to pull the covers of the top bed back and climbed on to tuck himself in.

“You guess?” George asked while sitting on the bed next to Sapnap’s.

“Figured you and Dream want to be on the same side.”

“What. Why?” George grimaced, though his defensive tone only served to make Skeppy laugh and wiggle his eyebrows. When he noticed Dream’s raised eyebrow, George nearly stuffed his face into his pillow.

“So you guys can go cwuddle and go—” Sapnap started making kissing noises.

Before George could hurl his pillow at him, Dream yanked the one on Sapnap’s bed and started smacking him.

“Ow! Okay! Okay!” Sapnap fell back on the bed and shielded himself in between laughs. “Daddy, chill.”

Dream huffed and dropped the pillow on him. “Idiot,” he muttered with an inkling of fondness.

“Can you guys shut up? I’m trying to sleep here,” Skeppy whined.

“Alright. Go to bed, kids,” Dream announced after giving Sapnap an I’m-watching-you gesture and then retreated to climb onto the bed above George’s.

“Aye-aye, captain!” Sapnap shouted as loud as he could, and Dream did hurl his pillow at him.

“Joke’s on you. Now I have two pillows to cuddle with.”

“That’s the only thing you’ll convince to cuddle with you,” he said with a snicker and got under the covers.

Sapnap looked over at him with a smile and asked, “Is this your way of asking me to cuddle with you, Georgie?”

“Go to sleep,” Dream groaned.

With a roll of his eyes and a smile, George buried his head into his pillow and turned to face the wall. However, as soon as he closed his eyes, it struck him.

They were doing this. They were stowaways on a cruise ship hundreds of miles away from AGE. For the first time in a decade, he was back in the real world with more power than ever edging at his fingertips.

Anything could go wrong at any second. He could lose control. His powers could go berserk and hurt someone. He could be thrown in prison. At eighteen, he no longer had protection from the school. At any moment, government officials could barge into the room and declare George unstable enough to commit to a facility.

After all, he was a Psychic. It wasn’t unheard of. The odds had always been stacked against him—all those statistics about Psychics being tranqed while shopping or in school for no reason besides bigotry weren’t percentages to him. They were his reality.

“George,” a voice snapped him out of his thoughts, and for a moment, he thought he imagined it until he heard Dream whisper above him.

“George.”

“Huh?”

“I can feel you freaking out. Go to sleep.”

“What?”

“You’re projecting again.”

“Oh,” was all he could manage. He swallowed the dryness in his throat and muttered, “Sorry.”

One of the more annoying struggles that had come with his empathy was projection. Sarah had explained how empathy ran both ways—other people’s emotions could affect his and he could affect other people’s emotions too.

In highly emotional states, it meant he could project his emotions onto others without realizing it. More specifically, he had a harder time keeping his emotions away from the people he was closest to, which meant that Dream was the one most often caught in the crossfire.

Unfortunately, with his developing powers and new environments, keeping his projection under control was proving to be more difficult.

“It’s okay. Just try to sleep, alright?”

“Okay.”

George laid on his back to get comfortable. After a moment, he turned to his right, and another moment passed before he tried laying on his left side. Beside him, Sapnap started snoring. George took a deep breath and squeezed his eyes tight, but he was having a hard time turning his brain off.

There was something pricking at his thoughts. He couldn’t quite tell what it was. Perhaps it was his worry about what would happen during the trip or about where Bad could be and what they were doing to him or about the incessant tension in his body that hadn’t disappeared since the nightmare he had the other night. It was like a shadow snaking around his shoulders every time he closed his eyes.

Above him, Dream shuffled and exhaled a heavy sigh. George bit the inside of his mouth and tried to push away the thoughts for Dream’s sake. What he didn’t expect was the abrupt warmth that radiated from the top bunk—a spell of safety shielding him like a forcefield. After a few seconds of indulging in Dream’s aura, his breathing calmed and his heartbeat began to slow.

It wasn’t long before he dozed off, though it wasn’t before hearing the soft words that cradled the air.

“Goodnight, George.”

“You want to go out... with me?” George looked around, expecting there to be someone else behind him. Yet the hallway was mostly empty, and there were only a couple of students shuffling to their classes and chatting with their friends.

“Of course. Who else?” Adri, a pretty Geo from the year under him, had approached him after their math period to ask him to dinner. To say George was surprised would’ve been an

understatement.

Although Adri was in her seventh year, she hung out with the upperclassmen often. Her long chestnut hair fell in gentle waves, and she had kind brown eyes and cute dimples that caved in like little smileys on her cheeks. Known as the sweetheart of her year, her smile and the endless string of compliments she gave to everyone brought life to every room she walked into. Out of all the girls George expected to ask him out—if any—she was the least likely candidate. He would've even expected the girl in his history class who was always insulting him to ask him out before Adri.

"Um." He scratched the back of his head and gripped the strap of his backpack tight. "Sure, I guess? I mean, yeah, of course."

His face burned at the sound of her chuckle. "Sweet. Tonight at six in the mess hall?" She reclined against the lockers next to her and looked up at him with pretty dimples and a beautiful smile.

He chuckled nervously. "Sounds great."

"Awesome. I'll see you there!" Without another word, she planted a peck on his cheek and pranced away with her ponytail swinging behind her, leaving George standing in the hallway like a frozen tomato.

"Dude!" Ssnap slapped his back, and George flinched, hitting the back of his head against the lockers in the process.

"What the hell? You almost gave me a heart attack."

*"Did Adri just ask **you** out?"*

George avoided his teasing gaze. "Maybe."

"Lucky twink." Ssnap ruffled his hair and George shoved his hand away with a whine. "Let's go tell Dream," Ssnap exclaimed.

"Tell me what?" Dream snuck up behind them and snaked both arms around their shoulders.

"How much of an idiot you are," George was quick to answer, turning away quickly to avoid Dream noticing the crimson color plaguing his face.

"Oh, come on." Dream laughed. "You know you love me."

"George just landed a date with Adri," Ssnap said, and George directed him a glare.

"Adri?" Dream arched an eyebrow, and the teasing glint in his eyes made George clear his throat and avoid his gaze. "How'd you manage that?"

"I don't know. She just came and asked me."

"Never thought I'd see the day our little Georgie would grow up like this." Dream faked wiping a tear from his eye, and Ssnap joined him in his exaggeration.

With a roll of his eyes, George shuffled past them, pretending his face wasn't mimicking the color of the rose bushes outside the window. "You're both idiots. I'm leaving."

"Make good choices," Dream shouted.

"Don't do anything I would," Ssnap added.

His friends burst into cackles as he strolled away and ignored the curious looks the people in the hallway sent him.

The day went by excruciatingly slow since he was glancing at the clock every few minutes. The closer it got to his date with Adri, the jumpier he got.

By the time it struck six, George was standing outside the mess hall impatiently tapping his foot.

By 6:05, he was chewing on his bottom lip and searching for Adri in the crowd of students scurrying inside.

By 6:10, his stomach was starting to churn and his fingers were digging into his forearms as he looked into the mess hall trying to see if he had missed her.

It was about to strike 6:15, and George was about to head back to his dorm disappointed when the sound of rushed sandals tapping on the floor caught his attention.

“George!” Adri came up beside him wearing a pretty summer dress and a gleaming smile. “I am so sorry! My friend held me up.”

“It’s okay.” He smiled and stood in front of her balancing on his back heels with his hands clasped in front of him, unsure of what to do next.

She giggled and nodded toward the door. “Should we head inside or...?”

“Right!”

They almost crashed into each other when they tried to enter the mess hall through the same door, and George was quick to back away and gesture for her to go in first which she giggled at. Once they picked up their food from the buffet, they chose a table outside that overlooked the garden. The sun was barely setting, so it made for a pretty view.

They ate in awkward silence for the first few minutes until Adri spoke up. “I know we don’t know each other very well, but you seem like a really cool person and nice friend, so I guess I just wanted to get to know you better.”

“That’s... cool,” he said, his eyes glued to his plate. His left hand was clutching his fork and his other was clinging to the hem of the table. He felt hyper-aware of his surroundings, and he could feel the beginning of a cyclone of emotions swirling in his gut.

***Not now,** was the only thought repeating inside his head.*

“A lot of my classmates think you’re scary because of your class, but I don’t think that.”

He looked at her and offered a small smile, but he couldn’t find anything to respond with besides a shy, “Thanks.”

From the corner of his eye, he could see students from the tables around them whispering to themselves and pointing to their table. Some girls to their left giggled. He dropped his fork on his plate and clasped his trembling hands under the table, trying to ignore the feelings of shame and embarrassment circulating their table. A drip of sweat rolled down the back of his neck and back, and it left a trail of electricity in its path.

“How is that? Being a Psychic I mean.”

“Um, well, I can’t say I like it,” he said.

Waves of sick amusement surrounded him like he was stuck in a failing circus act and everyone around him was laughing. He could hear everything—the whisper from the girl behind him, the cackle from the person three tables away, the snort from the guy sitting behind Adri. His finger tapped his lap to the rhythm of his accelerating heartbeat. The vortex in his mind opened and swallowed every emotion around them.

“Aw. It can’t be all bad, can it?” She leaned forward.

“I guess.” He chuckled, but it sounded forced, and the closer she got, the further he backed away. The murmurs around them grew more evident.

Adri backed off. Her disappointment was like a slap to the face, and a bout of anger and guilt stirred up in him as he tried to keep his emotions inside. Here he was, sitting with the only girl who had ever paid attention to him, and he could barely keep his powers away from her.

But the kids around them were talking. Feeling. Rushing him. He couldn’t hear their words, but their emotions were loud—the second-hand embarrassment and pity were suffocating him.

She forced a smile and took another bite of her pasta. “So your friends. Dream and Sapnap? They’re nice, huh?”

George’s face lit up at the mention of a topic that could get his mind off the emotions swamping him. “Yeah, they’re great! Sapnap’s a bit chaotic and Dream is an idiot, but I love them. They’ve been there for me for a long time.” He swallowed again, his smile shaky.

A spike of irritation not his own bubbled in his stomach, and he tried to expel it.

“That’s great.” She stared at her food and pursed her lips.

The girls next to them shook their heads in disapproval. One of them chortled. Another rolled her eyes. He tried to block them out. But it was too much. It was too much and George could barely handle a few emotions at once.

It was too much, and he was drowning. The waves from the surrounding auras were pounding on his head. He tried to hold them back. And then the vortex broke.

A dozen indiscernible sensations zoomed and zipped about him like a disordered highway of chaotic drivers, exploding into a bubble that entrapped them and absorbing the auras in the air and augmenting them by a hundred degrees.

His. Theirs. Hers. All in his head. All spilling out of him into a whirlpool of muddled emotions that caved in on him.

And when he met her gaze, he couldn’t contain them—this hub of feelings jumbled inside his head, some his own and some not. They fixed onto her without remorse. She jerked back with a wide gaze, and the spoon fell from her hand and splattered gravy all over the table.

Unsure of what to say and wanting so desperately to pretend it was all okay—that his head wasn’t a harboring a hurricane of unwanted emotions—he uttered the first thing that came to mind.

“Your friends seem nice too.”

Adri didn’t answer. Her hands gripped the table and her gaze sped around like she was growing

aware of everyone's attention on them. Of the explosion of ugly colors spiraling around them. Of him.

"Are you okay?" he managed.

It was the wrong question. Her chair scraped the floorboards when she sprung up. There were tears pricking at the corners of her eyes, and she rushed to say, "I—I can't be around you right now. I have to go." She almost tripped over herself as she rushed away.

"Wait, Adri!" George tried to call her back, but she was gone, and he was left alone with two half-eaten meals and his classmates struggling to contain their laughter.

"Everyone was laughing at us."

"And? Why does that matter? You finally got a girl to ask you out and you scare her away?"

"Dream."

George squeezed his eyes tight and held back his tears. He pressed the back of his head hard against the trunk of their tree and then opened his eyes to glare at the starry sky. With a deep breath, he averted both his disappointment and Dream's—though his was lighter and more compassionate than his own.

*"They were laughing at us. I could hear them. I could **feel** them."*

"Look, you've had your empathy for a few months now, and I know it must be hard, but you really need to get a grip on it."

"You don't understand what it's like, Dream. To feel like you're overdosing on everyone's feelings. To not even know which emotions belong to you. To feel like you're intruding on everyone's head. Don't you think I'm trying?" he shouted with an ardent ache in his throat and angry tears piling on the corners of his eyes.

It was rare for George to be so fired up, and the suddenness of it made Dream back up a little.

"Look, I know I don't understand but—"

"We're not all Mr. Perfect like you!"

Dream frowned. Anger seeped from his aura and entangled with George's like their emotions were engaging in some sort of fucked up dance.

"I'm not perfect."

George hummed. "Right. Because you're the guy who insists on winning everything and then gets angry when he doesn't. Don't I have a right to get angry about this too?"

His stomach burned. Dream's expression was tense, and his fists were clenching and unclenching at his sides.

"What? You want to fight me now? Beat me up? Do it."

George's head was spinning. This bout of fury was intoxicating. It whirled around him sucking every bit of negativity in the air and amplifying it by two hundred percent. His emotions surged toward Dream like they had done for Adri, and they fed off of each other like starved cannibalistic

forces trapped inside a feedback loop.

“Stop.” Dream closed his eyes, and his eyebrows scrunched together in frustration.

“We don’t all love having powers like you. We don’t all dream about stupid shit that won’t happen because the world is too fucked up to accept us! Superheroes?” He laughed. “What a fucking joke.”

“Shut up!” Dream pinned him to the trunk with his fist raised and swinging toward his jaw, and George closed his eyes, but the punch never came.

When he opened his eyes, he saw that his fist was frozen a millimeter away from his face, and they stared at each other in shock. The black hole in his gut dissipated and only the surge of adrenaline in his veins remained. His heart was echoing in his head.

After almost a minute of silence, Dream jerked back and looked down at his hands like he was afraid of them. “I— I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me.”

“I—” George’s mouth was dry. His mind was beginning to clear, and his emotions felt like his own again. “I think it was me.”

“What? But I was blocking you.”

George shook his head and stared at his trembling fingers. His vision was blurry and his throat burned. His empathy. It was his stupid empathy getting in the way again.

“I think I got inside your head this time... Sarah...” His voice cracked, and the tears spilled out when he remembered what she had told him. “She said I could project my emotions onto people if I wasn’t careful. That we could get stuck in a feedback loop that could end badly.” He covered his face. “I’m so sorry.”

They fell into an uncomfortable silence until Dream put his hand on his shoulder and started rubbing soft circles on his skin. When George turned and noticed the tenderness in his gaze, he tried his best to force a smile.

“It’s okay,” he said. “Seriously. It’s not your fault, and nothing happened. We’re okay.”

George pressed his head into the crook of Dream’s neck when he couldn’t contain the tears anymore. He sobbed in silence for what felt like hours. When the tears ran out and his gasps turned ragged and dry, George could only hear his hard breathing and Dream’s rapid heartbeat pounding in his left ear.

“What am I going to do... if I can’t control it? What if they send me away?”

“They won’t,” Dream replied with such confidence that, for a moment, even George believed him. “I won’t let them. We’ll learn to control your powers, George. I promise you we will.”

“We?” George managed a dry laugh, and he pulled away to search his eyes.

Dream smiled. “Yeah. We will. Together.”

Y'all consistently make me smile so big my cheeks hurt with your comments and support, so THANK YOU! I hope you all had a wonderful start of your year, and if you didn't, I hope I was able to make it at least a little brighter! I know y'all have certainly made my 2021 seem a little more hopeful :)

I could never thank y'all enough for all the kindness and support you've shown me. Thank you so much for reading! <3

Abrazos y besos,
Light

[tumblr](#) & [twitter](#)

Stowaways in a Caribbean Cruise

Chapter Notes

Again, thanks [Grav](#) and [Winter](#) for being the best betas around, and of course, [Grass](#)!

Also, special thanks to my best friends who stayed up on Skype with me yesterday when I was freaking out about a part of this chapter being bad and then helping me fix it (also for calming me down when my camera stopped working and I almost had a heart attack because this is a new computer and my semester is about to start).

This chapter has been edited for the printed copy (as of 05/19/22).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George awoke with a pillow to the face and a grinning pyromaniac looming over him like he was on the brink of smothering him. The sunbeams infiltrating the room from the window above the nightstand highlighted his face in such a way that made him look like a murderous maniac (he was half of that). Outside, the ship bellowed in horror with its echoing horn.

“Stop!” With a shriek, he sprung up to block Sapnap’s next attack and shoved him away. “I’m awake.”

“Change.” Sapnap smacked his face with the pillow again and then walked back to his bed. “We’re gonna go get breakfast.”

He tossed the pillow aside and flung him a pair of cargo shorts and a t-shirt.

“Where did you even get these?” George inspected them with a grimace. They looked one size too big and smelled like they had been buried somewhere deep inside an attic for a century.

Sapnap shrugged and pulled off his shirt to slip on a band tee that most definitely wasn’t his own.

“Skeppy got them. I didn’t ask how, but I’m sure you can guess. Now hurry up. I’m starving.”

“Fat arse,” George responded and this time used his pillow to block Sapnap’s attempt at smacking him with a laugh.

Ten minutes later, they were wandering the halls of the ship. Animated voices, bright laughs, and huge beams surrounded them everywhere they went.

As they walked, George found himself observing the travelers. A family dressed in fourth of July outfits even though the holiday was still a month away. A young couple snapping pictures of the dolphins that were leaping in the distance (their lively squeaks brought back traumatic memories from the previous night). A group of teenagers messing around by the restrooms who were being closely monitored by a security guard (thankfully, they were stealing away any attention he might’ve given George and Sapnap).

“Where are Dream and Skeppy?”

“I think they went to steal— I mean, uh, find us some passes for the dining hall. Dream said to be chill and not draw attention to ourselves or something.”

“And they left me with you?” George sent him an unimpressed look.

Sapnap rolled his eyes and replied, “Look, dude, you don’t gotta be jealous of my fire skills. Don’t worry. Your powers are almost as cool.” Grinning, he waved a dismissive hand, and it was George’s turn to roll his eyes.

“George! Sapnap!” Someone called out behind them. When they looked over their shoulders, they spotted Dream and Skeppy heading toward them with their arms full of food.

“Where did you get that?” George asked while swiping an apple from the top of Dream’s stack.

“The buffet, duh,” Skeppy replied.

“Let’s head to the deck. Just… try not to make a scene.” Dream sent Sapnap and Skeppy a warning glare, and George made fun of Sapnap’s offended expression.

The deck was louder than the rest of the ship. Amid all the chattering, there was the sound of bartenders at a tiki bar performing fire tricks and the vivacious sway of Caribbean music in the air. A newly-wed couple was performing an energetic routine on the dancefloor and there was a crowd cheering them on. The surrounding stimuli made his skin buzz with energy, and the beams all around him were contagious. Despite the amount of commotion, it felt strangely normal to stand in the middle of the deck with not an ounce of attention aimed his way.

For the first time, nobody knew him. Nobody feared him. And for a fleeting moment, George let himself close his eyes and imagined what it would be like to live in that kind of world.

They found a table by the pool in an area that wasn’t as crowded. There were only a few kids splashing in the water, and their parents were sitting and chatting away in the chairs nearby. As they settled down, they indulged in their stolen breakfast, which consisted of croissants, fruits, and bacon (which Sapnap called Techno when Dream went to take a bite).

“Cute girl checking you out. Three o’clock.” Sapnap elbowed Dream at one point during their meal and wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

George followed his gaze which led to a trio of girls watching them and giggling among themselves across the pool. One of them was very clearly checking Dream out. Her blonde waves framed the side of her face in an admittedly attractive way and her smile was flirty. But Dream didn’t bother looking over.

“Dream? Did you hear me?” Sapnap whisper-yelled (even though the girls were far enough they wouldn’t have heard him anyway).

“Yeah.”

“Well? Go do something!”

“Why?”

Dream pressed his back to the chair and watched his friend with a twinkle of amusement. George turned away with a scoff and took a bite of his apple. It had always annoyed him how cheeky he became in the face of people who found him attractive (and there were unfortunately plenty).

"I'm not interested, and I did say to avoid drawing attention to ourselves. This isn't exactly a vacation."

George wasn't sure what came over him, but before he could think better of it, he remarked, "And you decide to wear *that* to not draw attention to yourself?" gesturing to the fitted white shirt that, with the help of his sweat and the ocean breeze, was showing off his lean frame like a second skin. Not to mention his messy locks were swept over his forehead in that playful Dream manner that always had people giggling and tripping over their words when they watched him at the gym.

George's face burned upon noticing the way Skeppy and Sapnap paused and gaped at him. Even Dream, who was generally good at keeping his cool after such comments, was caught off guard by the suggestive statement.

The cocky smirk that followed made his face buzz. He cursed himself internally and then pretended to stare at the old lady that was showing off her merengue skills on the dance floor.

"Aw, were you checking me out, George? I'm flattered."

"I am not," he defended himself with a scoff, and for whatever reason, he became increasingly aware of the sweaty shirt sticking to the back of his neck.

"Admit it." Dream leaned closer with a sly grin. "You totally were," he said and teasingly grazed the back of George's hand that was set on the table. George bit the inside of his mouth and kept quiet. He stared more intensely at the dance floor.

"Okay, okay. We all know Dream's smokin' hot or whatever but seriously, dude? Aren't you going to make your move?" Sapnap gestured toward the girls who were still looking their way.

Skeppy crossed his arms and watched Sapnap with his eyebrows raised. "If you're so insistent, why don't you go?"

"Fine." Sapnap took a sip of his soda, slammed it on the table, and stood up. "I will." He swept the spikes of hair on his forehead aside and said, "Watch and learn, boys." Then he strolled toward the girls with too much confidence in his step.

"Well, this is going to go great." Skeppy's quipped with sarcasm.

Dream chuckled and shook his head. He toyed with the straw on his drink and met George's eyes with a playful gaze. Having been caught staring, George was quick to turn away.

They watched as Sapnap reached the girls and directed the one who was staring at Dream a few words. The girl's expression shifted from hopeful to confused to insulted in a record span of ten seconds. Dream choked on his soda and his drink spilled through his nose before breaking into uncontrollable wheezing. The couple beside them sent them a weird look, and George flashed them an apologetic smile.

The girl jolted up, hurled her drink at Sapnap, and marched away with her friends on her trail.

"What did he say?" Skeppy asked.

Once Dream managed to catch his breath, he cleared his throat and pulled out his best Sapnap expression. "Hey mamas, come here often? What do you say I take y'all out to dinner sometime?"

Skeppy burst into cackles and slapped his hand on the table. George shook his head in disapproval while watching Sapnap return with his head hanging. "Did that idiot really ask all of them out at

the same time?”

Sapnap slumped onto his chair with his arms crossed, and when Dream kept laughing, he slapped his shoulder and muttered something about girls not having good taste in men.

With an amused huff, George turned away to look onto the scene at the deck. An old woman was walking arm-in-arm with her husband toward the ballroom. A pretty girl was posing by the railing as a photographer snapped pictures of her. Four energetic kids were playing marco-polo in the water.

An odd feeling of anxiety swept over him when he fixed his gaze on a particular kid who looked to be around grade school age. There was something off about him, not in the way he looked, but in the way he was moving about the water while chasing the other kids with a big smile.

He was swimming in circles with his eyes closed. His frustration at continually missing his giggling friends grew more evident by the second. All of a sudden, his hand flew up in the direction of the smallest girl of the bunch who was swimming toward the deeper end, and George’s stomach dropped when he realized what was happening.

Like the unruly surges of an ocean amid a tropical storm, the water came to life. The kids began to shriek, and it caught the attention of the adults nearby just as the frantic waves pulled the girl under.

“Sam!” a woman shouted, and she threw herself into the pool. As she pulled her daughter up, she fought against the current to swim to the ledge.

Another woman rushed to help the girl out and wrapped a towel around her. The girl coughed and trembled in her towel. Her mother knelt down to cup her face and then pulled her into a hug.

As quickly as the water came to life, it stilled, leaving only the boy frozen in the middle of the pool—dozens of eyes fixed on him. Frantic whispering accompanied the tension in the deck. The Caribbean music in the background sounded more menacing with no laughter to complement it.

George gripped the table as he watched the frightened boy and sensed the stress stinging the air. His mother helped him out of the water and placed a towel on his shoulders. Her expression looked to be a mix of horror and panic.

“Your boy needs to be committed to a facility!” Sam’s mother shouted.

“Ma’am, I’m so sorry, I didn’t—he’s not—” The boy’s mother clutched the towel around his shoulders and struggled to formulate anything besides a string of incoherent sounds.

Sam’s mother cut her off. “You’re sorry?” With an appalled expression, she left her daughter in the care of the other woman and stepped forward, extending her arms to gesture to the people around them.

“Everyone saw what happened! Your son almost *drowned* my daughter and you have the nerve to apologize like it’s nothing? This is why *freaks* like him aren’t allowed on this ship without permission!”

The fear and fury agitating their surroundings made George’s pulse quicken. His exhalations turned sharp in an attempt to expel the unpleasant emotions. When he looked back at the girl who was sobbing in the other woman’s arms, the terror drowning her aura whole made his heart sink further.

He didn't doubt it was her first experience with an EM—likely fortifying a traumatic memory that would resurface every time she met another.

It was common to lash out after that. That fear was the kind that turned people like her into people like her mother or like those who avoided interaction with EMs at all costs. They were the kind of people who looked terror-stricken every time they tip-toed around people like George.

When he turned back to the boy and sensed the shame, confusion, and shock encompassing the air around him, he sunk into that familiar pit of desolation. Tears pricked his own eyes as he relived every encounter he had experienced himself at his age.

The day his powers manifested. The day he met Maya. The day he went on his date with Adri. All these countless incidents that had pushed him further into despising this endless curse—those which had made him perceive the figure in the mirror with nothing but resentment.

And when his eyes landed on Sam's mother whose mouth was moving but whose hateful words had lost their sound to George, an enraged force in his mind urged to break through—to stand up and defend the boy.

Punish her, the thought that flashed through his mind sent a chill down his spine.

It's not her fault, he reminded himself, even though he so desperately wanted to believe the opposite—to turn the mother into a villain. Yet had he hurt the innocent girl's mother, it would've made him as much of a villain as she would have already thought of him.

“Please, we're going to be on this ship until tomorrow. I really didn't know he could—”

The boy tried to approach the girl with an apologetic expression, but Sam's mother yanked her daughter away and shouted, “Get that freak away from her.”

The whiplash that cut through the air set off a fire at his core, and the energy charging his fingertips nearly made him stand up and send the woman flying off the deck.

She's scared.

He clenched his fists in attempt to contain the power building inside him.

Not now.

Next to him, Dream's fist slamming the table made him flinch. It seemed the scene had caught his friends' attention too.

Dream's bottom lip was quivering and his ardent eyes burned with a fire not unlike the one burning at the tiki bar. His rage was so fervent it trespassed his mind block and amplified George's.

Not now, he repeated when the unsettling murmurs erupted in his mind and tugged him into a state of fight or flight.

He swallowed the feeling, and he covered Dream's fist with his hand and caressed it with his thumb. Dream met his gaze.

It took everything in him to keep his voice steady and calm when he whispered, “If we do something, we'll draw attention to ourselves.”

“It's not his fault.”

“I know.”

Dream’s shoulders slumped, and he turned away, not bearing to catch another glance of the boy’s expression.

As the woman pulled her son away from the deck, Sam’s mother caressed her daughter’s head and watched the boy leave with disgust. Many of the other onlookers did the same and others muttered slurs that made Dream almost get on his feet until George tightened his grip on his hand.

“We should go,” George said.

No one refused.

For the rest of the day, they were locked in their room. It was quiet for the most part. George buried his nose in a book he had snuck into Dream’s backpack; Skeppy and Sapnap started scrolling through the TV channels; and Dream swiped through his tablet and sat on Sapnap’s bed with a restless leg.

It was unsettling.

Their loaded auras felt like an elephant crammed in the tiny room that pressed against his chest and made it hard to breathe. Even so, he preferred to focus on their emotions as opposed to facing his own.

Skeppy, who had been the one most confident in their mission, had lost his optimism, and his aura was as quiet as ever.

The spark of courage in Sapnap’s aura—the one that had never ceased to amaze George—had deflated. George hated seeing him so defeated, especially when Sapnap had always been the one to stand so confidently next to George when he hadn’t been able to do it himself.

And then there was Dream whose emotions were, shockingly, missing. It was a complete contrast to earlier when his anger had been so fierce it had felt like a dagger piercing him.

George hated it. He hated it because he knew Dream was bottling it up—hiding it so that George wouldn’t have to deal with it. But George would’ve preferred to deal with the conflicting emotions any day over sensing the empty void in the part of his mind reserved for Dream.

It wasn’t until the moon rose when Skeppy and Sapnap had dozed off watching old films that Dream asked George if he wanted to take a walk.

He gave a silent nod, and they left the room and drifted through the hallways of the side of the ship to watch the starry sky.

“So you think this shirt looks good on me, huh?” Dream glanced at him with a laugh.

It was a deflection—a damn good one at that seeing as the warmth that rose up his neck made him forget anything he might’ve wanted to say.

George turned up his nose and replied with a dry, “As if. You look and smell like a wet dog in it.”

Dream wheezed, and he replied by shaking his head and muttering a soft, “You’re such an idiot.”

Then he gained a lead on George and spun around to face him, not losing his footing as he fell into a casual backwards stride in the way he did when he was showing off. He folded his hands behind

his head and his lopsided grin pricked annoyance within George.

“I think the red in your sweatshirt really brings out your eyes,” Dream said.

George scoffed and stuffed his hands in his pocket.

They ended up at the deck again. However, it was deserted this time. There was trash scattered on the floor and unfinished drinks abandoned on the tables—it was like a shadow of the energetic scene from a few hours ago.

The lights flickered on when they detected their motion, and when George spotted the lone figure sitting at the edge of the pool, he frowned, catching Dream’s attention in the process.

It was the Aqua boy from earlier. His shoulders were trembling, and the repeating pattern of soft heaves and a hiccup he was letting out was heartbreaking.

George closed his eyes and sunk into his dread. The uneasy emotion swamping him pulled back ugly memories that were all too familiar to him. When he opened them, he noticed Dream’s lips were pressed together tight like he was trying to decide if he should approach the boy or not.

George advanced and left Dream standing behind them in silence without another thought. The boy startled when he felt George sit next to him, but he didn’t run away.

After a moment of them staring at the unmoving water, George said, “I know how you feel.”

“Huh?” the boy replied.

George hesitated before he pulled his hand up and levitated the beach ball at the other side of the pool. With a gasp, the boy scrambled back and sent George a look of terror he had long ago grown familiar with.

“It’s okay. Having powers isn’t so bad.” He smiled and lowered his hand. The boy stared at him with huge celeste eyes like he had just met his hero. “You’ll grow fond of them,” George continued, and he leaned closer and whispered, “Maybe you’ll even become a superhero one day. Who knows? Have you heard of Aquaman?”

The boy shook his head.

“He’s a superhero from a very long time ago. He could control water like you, and he could even talk to fish. Who knows, maybe you’ll learn to talk to fish one day too. How cool would that be, huh?”

George’s smile widened, and the boy giggled like a kid ought to do at his age instead of mourning a person he would never become due to a part of him he could never change. Or worse—instead of fearing his own reflection every morning and wishing everything away. All because the world was too heartless to accept them.

“Aaron,” a panicked voice called out behind them.

When he turned, he saw the boy’s mother rushing toward them in a frenzy. Aaron jumped up and ran to her. When she took him in her arms, the motherly love exuding from her aura set off a feeling of nostalgia within George that caused his throat to close in on itself. At that moment, he ached for warmth, so he made his way back to Dream and shifted close to him if only to feel his body heat near.

“Don’t ever run away like that again! You’re not supposed to be out here,” she scolded him before pulling him into another hug.

When she took notice of George and Dream, she said, “I’m sorry if he was bothering you two. I—please, I can compensate you, just don’t let the—”

“It’s alright, ma’am,” Dream assured her with a smile.

She looked like she was on the verge of crying when she stood up and grabbed Aaron’s hand.

“Thank you. I’m sorry again.”

Before she could walk away, Dream called out after her. “Sorry to intrude, but have you thought about enrolling him in a special school?”

“I’m sorry?” she replied with a frown.

“A special school for kids like him.” His smile widened. “It’s safe. My…” He thought carefully about his next sentence. “... brother is like him, and he attends a school called AGE. He loves it there. He’s made really good friends, and he can control his powers really well. He loves them. I really recommend it.”

The woman stared at him for a moment before returning his smile. “Thank you. I’ll think about it.”

When they disappeared around the corner, Dream turned to face George and the softness in his gaze made him blush.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing, just…” There was hesitation in his movement when he stepped closer. He buried his hands in his pockets, and his half-amused and comforting smile was lighter than the fresh ocean breeze enveloping them. “Aquaman, huh?”

George responded with a scoff and twisted sideways like his face wasn’t a complete tomato. Then he rubbed the sides of his arms, not so much from the cold but to stimulate the numbness on his skin. “Shut up,” he muttered.

Dream gazed at him, and his calloused fingertips lifted his chin. His breath hitched at the unexpected action. It was the most tender touch George had ever received. His gaze melted him like he was drowning in honeycomb.

“I’m proud of you,” he whispered.

“Thanks,” George said.

The moment lasted three seconds too long, and before his warm breath could draw George in, he backed away and reeled in his thoughts. Clearing his throat, he toyed with the inside of his pocket and said, “We should head back.”

“Wait—” Dream took hold of his wrist before he could walk off, and his fingertips burned his skin. He pointed to the sky. “Let’s just watch the stars for a bit. The sky is beautiful tonight.”

George hesitated, but he didn’t stop Dream when he dragged him toward the front of the ship. He laid on his back and patted the spot next to him with a dumb smile. George snickered, but he followed his suit.

The hundreds of stars were speckled in clumps across the canvas of black that was the sky, and George let himself submerge in their beauty. Next to him, Dream scooted closer, their shoulders finding warmth against each other.

His eyelids began to droop, and the gentle rock of the sea and calm of sleep began to lure him in. With a heavy sigh, his head began to bob until it settled peacefully against Dream's shoulder.

Dream's chuckle felt like a pleasant tickle to him, and he smiled and murmured, "Shush."

"Sleep well, George," he whispered.

"Okay, what about this one?" Dream pointed at a big, burly man wearing what looked like half of a meatball helmet.

He had dragged George all the way to their tree to show him his comic book collection after George had declared he had no idea who Spiderman was, and ten-year-old Dream had freaked out and told him he had to be educated.

"No idea," George replied and elicited another groan from Dream.

George laughed upon noticing the frustration on his face. He slumped his head against the tree and skimmed the pictures as Dream frantically flipped through the pages of his comic books.

"His name is Juggernaut. He's a really strong bad guy who fights the X-Men and Wolverine."

George hummed. "And Wolverine is..."

Dream paused and turned to him with an expectant look. George narrowed his eyes, trying to remember the name from the dozens of others he had given him.

"The one with claws..?"

"Yes!" Dream raised his fist in triumph and then hurried to snatch another book from his pile and swipe through the pages in a rush. George laughed at his clumsy enthusiasm.

"Okay, next," Dream exclaimed.

He pointed at a man wearing what looked like a fish suit who was holding a trident with his right hand while his left held onto the middle of his belt. His cocky grin looked oh-so-familiar, and with a snort, George met Dream's gaze and asked, "Is it you?"

Dream rolled his eyes. "His name is Aquaman. He's the king of the sea!"

"Aquaman? More like fish dude. Why do you even like all of these guys?" George took another book from the stack and opened it to a random page. "What even is this? Arm-fall-out-boy? Animal-Vegetable-Mineral man? Squirrel girl? This is so stupid." He tossed the comic books aside one by one onto the read stack until he got tired of swiping through them.

"They're superheroes, George. Well, except Animal-Vegetable-Mineral man. But anyway, it's like that Harry Potter guy you like."

George huffed, taking offense to his favorite fictional character being compared to these lame people no one cared to remember.

“Harry Potter is different.”

“Oh, really? He has powers, he’s a chosen one, and he’s supposed to fight an evil noseless guy. What isn’t superhero-like about that?” Dream flashed him the know-it-all smile that George had always found annoying.

“Okay, but what’s the point?” George took a comic, pointed at it with his other hand, and grimaced.

“What’s the point of all those fantasy novels you like to read?” Dream countered.

George tossed the comic onto the stack and contemplated the question. His novels were a source of relief for him. They helped him cope with his inability to control his powers to their full extent and the insecurity he felt about his future because they talked about people like him who had made it—people who were admired.

Sarah had told him that to control his powers, he had to stop living in fear of them, but it was a difficult task when everyone spent their time treating him like monster. Yet indulging in his fantasy worlds, if only for a few hours, convinced him he had the potential to live a different life.

“Hope.”

Dream beamed and his finger traced the picture of Aquaman. The twinkle in his eyes had returned—the one that made George smile every time he saw it.

“I want to help people when I grow up. I want to be like them. I want to save them from the bad guys.” He looked back at George with a gentle smile. “Because real people have done a crappy job at saving us.”

George beheld Dream with admiration before replying, “I wish I could be like you.”

Dream answered almost instantly. “But you can, George. Join me!”

“What?” He snickered. “Are you recruiting people for a superhero team now?” He shook his head at his optimism. If only things were that easy.

“You’re an idiot,” Dream replied and laughed. He leaned into his shoulder, and with a whine, George shoved the weight off him, though he couldn’t wipe the smile from his face.

“In the future. You, me, and Sapnap. We’ll make our own superhero group. We’ll help people! Together,” Dream told him, and he sounded so confident George couldn’t help but entertain the thought.

George pursed his lips, his smile half-fading. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be good enough with my powers.”

“When you are—” Dream said, flinging his arm around George’s shoulders and giving him a noogie. George tried to shove him away with an escaped laugh. “And you will.” The sparkle in his eyes made George’s chest feel full, and at that moment, not a single negative thought crossed his mind. “We’ll make it happen.”

“Promise?” George asked.

Dream’s smile was contagious, and it convinced George that meeting him had been the best thing to ever happen in his life.

“I promise.”

George stirred awake to Latin music, heels clicking, people chit-chatting, and glasses clinking. When he opened his eyes, it was to the sun blaring down at him, and he could already feel the sunburn developing.

“Morning,” Dream’s breathy whisper tickled his ear, and George recoiled upon realizing they were practically spooning. His face felt hotter than the summer morning when he jumped to his feet.

Dream burst into laughter and sat up.

“We fell asleep out here?”

“Yeah, I don’t even remember when I fell asleep. I meant to wake you up.” Dream stood up and stretched his arms. His bed hair was full-on display despite not having slept in the comfort of one.

The ship blew its horn, and over the speakers, a voice announced, “We will be arriving at the Miami dock in half an hour.”

“Hear that? We’re almost there.”

George swallowed and gave a shaky smile. “Yeah...”

Dream frowned. “You okay?”

“Just nervous, I guess...” He rubbed his arm and fixed his gaze on the thin line of land now visible on the horizon.

“It’ll be fine.” Dream patted his hair like a dog, and George slapped it away with an annoyed smile. Dream giggled and said, “Let’s go find Sapnap and Skeppy.”

The two weren’t hard to find seeing as they had gathered their stuff from the room and were on their way down the hallway by the time Dream and George arrived. Skeppy shoved Dream’s backpack into his arms and glanced between the two of them with a questioning gaze.

“Well, well, well. Look who showed up.” Sapnap’s suggestive smile drove George to slap him in the arm and mutter some unfriendly terms.

“So far, so good, but we’re not in Florida yet, so let’s try not to get caught, alright, team?” Dream declared as they made their way to the deck.

“Oh look who it is, Sapnap, your failed dates.” George gestured toward the girls by the tiki bar with a taunting smile. The blonde one who had been checking Dream out the day before caught sight of them and offered a flirtatious smile and a shy wave toward said boy.

“I think they’re coming over, guys. Act cool.” Sapnap “casually” leaned against the railing with his arms crossed, started whistling, and looked away like he hadn’t noticed the girls.

With a scoff, George elbowed him in the stomach which caused Sapnap to squeak in surprise and mutter some unpleasanties. When the girls stopped in front of them, he quickly cleared his throat and smiled again.

Dream raised his eyebrows when the middle one offered him a hand. “Hi, there. I’m Stephanie.”

Hesitantly, he shook it.

“I’m surprised I didn’t notice you until yesterday. Was it your first time at the pool since the cruise began?”

“Yeah, my friend doesn’t go out too often so we keep him away from the sun.” Dream nodded toward Sapnap whose glare reserved a special kind of fire, and George and Skeppy tried to contain their laughter.

“Oh. That’s okay.” She approached, looking up at him playfully. George bit the inside of his mouth and turned away, preferring not to suffer through watching yet another person flirting with Dream.

“Sooo... what’s your name?”

“Well, I’m Dream, and these are my friends, Sapnap, Skeppy, and George.” He shuffled closer to George when he mentioned his name, and their arms grazed each other in the process. George felt the need to pull away.

“Nice to meet you. What brings you guys around here?”

“Just heading back to Florida like everyone else.”

“Oh, really? Traveling with anyone else? Family? School?” She tilted her head and narrowed her eyes, and George found it a bit intimidating. “Maybe a girlfriend?”

George couldn’t tell if Dream was acting oblivious to her advances or if he actually was oblivious, but he answered with a relaxed, “Nah. Just a guy’s trip.”

“Oh. That sounds fun!” Stephanie perked up. She reached into her pocket and slipped out her phone. “Do you have a Fastgram? We should add each other.”

“I don’t actually.”

Stephanie raised an eyebrow. “You don’t have a Fast?”

“Nope.”

“How do you talk to your friends then? Text messaging?” she replied with a condescending laugh.

The sound of the intercom announcing there were ten minutes until docking interrupted them.

“I don’t mean to cut the conversation short, but we have to go.”

With one last smile, Dream spun on his heel, hooked his arm with George’s, and pulled him in the opposite direction.

The next events unfolded too quickly for George to process.

As George glimpsed over his shoulder, he watched an offended Stephanie turn around and run into a waiter in the process. The waiter who was carrying a silver platter was knocked backward into a couple who was snapping pictures with their baby in front of the railing. The baby slipped from the woman’s grasp and a blood-curdling shriek escaped her as her baby flew over the ledge and she was unable to catch it.

Though Dream rushed to reach for the baby too, even his instincts weren’t quick enough to save it,

and without thinking twice, George raised his arm and levitated the baby before it could fall into the ocean. The crowd surrounding them stilled, and everyone watched aghast as the baby was levitated into its mother's arms.

With trembling hands, George exhaled in relief once the baby was safe in its mother's grasp, and clutching her child, she backed away from them with tears in her eyes. The man next to her got in front of her and raised a shaky finger at him, his mouth agape but unable to speak.

"He's a Psychic!" one of the girls behind them shrieked, and chaos erupted in the span of a few seconds.

"Call security!"

"Stay away from them!"

"He tried to throw a baby off the ship!"

Although George was frozen in his spot, unable to react with the punches of panic striking him from every direction, Dream wasn't.

He grabbed his arm and tugged him away. Skeppy and Sapnap followed as they scrambled through the confused and terrified crowd. They dodged three security guards coming at them, and Skeppy knocked two others in front of them with a gust of wind.

Voices shouted behind them, but George could hardly make out anything with his quickening heartbeat. Without Dream pulling most of his weight and weaving through the people for them, he would've already collapsed.

They reached a dead-end at the other end of the ship. The guards were hot on their tails.

"What do we do?" Skeppy exclaimed when they reached the railing.

Over his shoulder, George caught sight of the guards coming at them with their weapons drawn. Their hands were trembling as they spoke into their radios. The adrenaline made his blood buzz like he was a ticking time bomb, and his instincts told him to throw them off the ship, but he contained himself.

"We jump," Dream said.

"What?" Sapnap looked at him like he had lost his mind.

They seemed to be less than half a mile away from docking, and it would only be a few dozen meters of swimming if they did jump. Besides, there was no way they were getting out of the ship unscathed if they stayed.

"Skeppy, you're going to have to launch us as far as you can."

"It won't be far."

"It doesn't matter."

Dream climbed onto the railing, and he helped George up with a tight grip on his arm like he could slip away at any second. They locked eyes, and George's heart felt like it was at the brink of exploding when he realized what he was about to ask of him.

"George, you're going to have to help Skeppy with this one."

“I don’t think I can.” His hands hadn’t stopped trembling. Behind them, the guards were shouting at them to put their hands up.

“George.”

Dream gripped the sides of his arms, stared him straight in the eyes, and held him still. Every other sound turned into background noise when he spoke.

“I need you to trust me. You can do this. Get us as far as you can and just focus on me, okay? Focus on me.”

There wasn’t a single hint of doubt in his gaze. George struggled to nod. His heartbeats sounded like a shotgun going off in his ears.

“It’s now or never,” said Skeppy.

The four of them held onto each other’s hands and faced the dock.

“Ready. Set. Go!” Dream exclaimed.

George squeezed his eyes shut and let himself fix his focus on Dream’s aura as he felt the push of air throw them over the railing. He pointed his hands down, and he inhaled deeply before he levitated their bodies as far as he could.

They were in the air for a much shorter time than it felt. When the impact of the water hit him, his body was submerged whole, and the tendrils of water burned his nostrils until a hand gripped the back of his shirt and pulled him up. He gasped and met Dream’s eyes, and it took his ears a second to realize Dream was shouting at him.

“Hurry! Climb!”

Someone behind him nudged his arm, and when he turned, he realized they were right beside the dock and Sapnap was reaching his hand down for him. He helped him up, and Dream climbed up behind him. They ran down the platform, shoving past a few stunned bystanders.

The rest of their escape was a blur. George could only register the way Dream gripped his wrist as they crossed the streets and docked through alleyways until they were sure nobody was on their pursuit.

When they reached an empty pavilion at a park, they stopped to catch their breaths and to sit down. Dream helped George onto one of the benches and kept rubbing soothing circles on his shoulder that allowed his thoughts to slow down.

Sapnap and Skeppy were quiet as they pulled off their shirts to strain them. Meanwhile, George was still trying to focus on anything besides the image of the terrified passengers engraved in his mind.

“Well... at least that was the most epic escape I’ve ever been a part of.” Skeppy tried to ease the tension and proceeded to use the wind like a hairdryer on his clothes.

“No kidding.” Sapnap followed his example and opted to open a flame on his palm to dry himself off.

With a tone void of emotion, Dream said, “Let’s get out of these wet clothes and buy our bus tickets so we can head to my family’s cabin. We can rest there for the night and then take the truck

and our emergency funds.”

“We’re stealing from your family?” Sapnap asked with hesitation.

“I call this a good enough emergency.”

“Will they know we’ve been there?” asked George.

He hugged his arms when the soft breeze blowing under the shadow of the pavilion provoked chills all over his body. He felt a presence looming behind them, but when he looked over his shoulder to search the field, he found that it was empty.

“By the time they find out, we’ll be long gone.”

“You okay there, George?” Sapnap asked, and when George turned back, the three of them were staring at him with a mix of concern and curiosity.

“Fine,” he said and rubbed his sides.

“You look pale,” Dream said, and he kneeled in front of him to press the back of his palm against his forehead.

George nudged it away, and avoiding his eyes, he asked, “Are we sure we can do this? We saw what— what just happened back there. What if we fail?”

The five seconds of silence that followed didn’t help the dread settling at the pit of his stomach. It also didn’t help when Skeppy replied with, “Of course we can— will.”

On any other occasion, George wouldn’t have put any importance on the missing beats between his words had he not noticed the subtle panic slipping through his aura, even with his well-performed smirk.

“Don’t be stupid,” Skeppy continued with a chuckle, and George could tell he was trying to reassure himself more than him.

At the distant sound of children laughing over the hill, Dream sighed and said, “Let’s go before someone calls the cops on us. We have to get going.”

George didn’t miss the dreadful thought that slipped through Dream’s mind block, and he didn’t comment on it either. There was no need. Because he was right.

We don’t have the option to fail.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is brought to you by hours of tears, countless revisions, many "I hate writing" 's, and reading a really good writing book only thinking, "man, my story is crap if I had to have done this much mapping out before even writing the first sentence..."

Anyway, this story received r/Fanfiction's 2020 Best RPF Award somehow!? So thanks for everyone who voted, y'all are so awesome! I love you all!!!

Important Updates: This story will be updated every other Sunday from now on since I am starting my semester as a miserable math major again and I have a lot of other responsibilities to take care of, not to mention these chapters take hours upon hours to write and revise. Also would like to take the time to say that y'all sharing and enjoying this story means the world to me! Thank you so much for all your support, I never thought this would be my biggest project of all things. Additionally, I don't mind fan art for this story (on the contrary, I talk about it nonstop to my friends and smile 24/7 when it happens), but if you'd like to do any writing remotely related to this universe, please, please, please, contact me beforehand. This is an original universe I might one day publish in and I don't want to run across legal problems in the future.

Thank y'all so much for all you do for me and for putting such a big smile on my face with your comments and thoughts! <3

Muchisimos Abrazos,
Light

[tumblr](#) & [twitter](#)

Floridian Green Man on the Loose

Chapter Notes

As usual, thanks Gray, Winter, and Grass for their wonderful input! They are literally my guardian angels as I write this. **Important update announcements in the ending note, make sure to read it!**

Edit: This chapter has been revised for the printed copy as of 08/01/2022

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"And what are you going to do about it, Psychic?" the guy two years above George taunted after shoving him in the hallway and knocking his book from his hands. While George kneeled, the guy stood akimbo in front of him with his chest puffed and a wicked smile.

His name was Ethan. He was a show-off shifter whose primary form was a bear. He looked like one too, standing about a head taller than George and with an attitude as big as his forearms. He seemed to be itching for a fight in some sort of messed-up way of asserting dominance.

As a transfer who had started at AGE about a month ago, there were rumors that he had been kicked out of his last school for almost killing a classmate during a fight. Yet others theorized it hadn't been his fault considering specialized shifter schools were notorious for being the toughest EM schools, and unless you could stand your ground and grow a tough skin, they were impossible to survive. What Ethan didn't realize was that unlike the rumors made him out to be, George was anything but tough.

"I don't want to fight," George responded while picking the book up. He flinched when Ethan kicked it across the floor before he could, and it collided with someone's shoes.

He glanced up to see a boy with circular glasses and a kind face, standing confidently in the middle of the hall.

"Hey, Ethan, that's not very nice," the boy said, picking up George's book and helping him up.

Ethan scoffed. "This is none of your business."

"It is my business if it means my classmate is getting bullied," he replied with a frown and stepped in front of George. Standing at about George's height with a soft smile, he looked as intimidating as a teddy bear.

*"This is between me and him. So **get lost**." Ethan took a step forward and towered over the newcomer.*

Despite the boy's short height and scrawny appearance, he didn't back down. Swallowing, George tapped the boy's shoulder and told him it was fine—if anything to prevent both of them from being broken in half like a toothpick. Yet the boy kept a firm gaze on Ethan.

There was already a whispering crowd forming around them with nosy faces poking into the circle to see what all the commotion was about. George bit his tongue to prevent a bigger scene. Maybe he could slip out unnoticed? But would it be fair to leave the boy by himself with a jerk like Ethan after he had just defended him?

Before George could decide, an unfamiliar voice spoke. "Ethan, you dumb-face, leave them alone."

A tan boy with dark eyes, a very nice pair of eyebrows, and a spiky mess of black hair entered the scene. With his hands buried in the pocket of his light-blue hoodie and his troublemaker grin, he stopped beside the boy. In spite of the fact he was shorter than all of them and his laid-back posture didn't exactly scream intimidating, his confidence was unwavering. The yawn he gave made Ethan narrow his eyes.

As he glanced between them, he seemed to decide it wasn't worth the fight, so he huffed and said, "Can't even defend yourself, loser. Whatever."

Then he shoved his way through the crowd with a scowl.

With the anticlimatic end to the confrontation, the people around them lost interest and the crowd dispersed, leaving George by himself with the two boys.

"Skeppy, I had it handled!"

"Uh-huh, like you had that argument with the goth girl under control last week?"

"I wasn't going to fight her!" The first boy pouted, and his glasses fell crooked on his nose. "Not that I was going to fight Ethan either. Not everything can be resolved by fighting. Can't we just all be nice to each other?" He crossed his arms. "Besides, I saw you chanting 'fight' in the crowd before I stepped in."

With his smirk still intact, Skeppy said, "You know, Bad, your nickname makes no sense. Remind me how you convinced us to use it again?"

George cleared his throat, feeling like an intruder in their... whatever it was they were having. But either they didn't hear him or they chose to ignore him.

"I didn't ask you to call me that!"

Skeppy thought for a second before he snapped his fingers and said, "Oh, yeah. Finn called you a "bad boy" after you decorated a classroom with Skeppy-themed decorations and cupcakes with my face on them during April Fool's, right?"

"It was supposed to be embarrassing for you!"

Skeppy's grin widened. "Yeah, right, whatever you say."

Bad's gaze finally landed on George who was still standing awkwardly in between them. "Oh. How rude of me. I didn't introduce myself." He flashed George a big smile and shook his hand without hesitation. "I'm Bad, and this little muffin is Skeppy. You're the Psychic from year six, right?"

George nodded, and when he took back his hand, he held onto his book sheepishly behind him. Bad's indifference to his class kept him on edge granted that even after years of attending AGE, many of his peers were still hesitant toward him. It was a lot better than his first year, but it still wasn't common for people to outright approach him or act friendly toward him.

“That’s awesome. I’ve never met a Psychic before. What’s your name, again?”

“George.”

“Well, George, I’m sorry about Ethan. That mean potato doesn’t have any manners.” He shook his head in disapproval. Then he offered another smile. “Do you want to eat lunch with us? We’re heading to the mess hall right now.”

*The question took him by surprise, and he looked between the two of them with suspicion. Skeppy seemed too distracted staring at the end of the hall to offer an opinion on the subject, so he asked, “You’re inviting **me**? To eat with **you**?”*

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

“Why?”

It was Bad’s turn to look confused. “Why not?”

“No, I mean, you don’t think I’m…”

Over Bad’s shoulder, George could see a few students giving him the side-eye. His grip on his book tightened, and he looked away. Confronting new people had always been more difficult without Sapnap or Dream’s support, and it was hard to keep himself from reverting to nervous habits.

Bad’s smile expanded. “You seem like a cool person,” he said. Without another thought, he took George’s wrist and dragged him down the hallway. “Come on. It’ll be fun.”

George opened his eyes with a jolt. It took him a second to gauge his surroundings—the humming of an engine, the rumbling of the wheels against the road, and the occasional cough and murmur in the background.

He scrunched his nose at the scent of dirty wet socks and cigarette breath penetrated into his seat. Next to him, Dream shifted and tucked his hands into his armpits, his chest rising and falling with his calm breathing. The bus swayed when it hit a bump, and in the front, a baby wailed awake when a bag from the overhang crashed down.

He pressed his back to the seat and gripped the scratchy fabric of the armrest. He peeked in between the curtains and noticed they were driving through the middle of nowhere.

When he let the curtain close again, the sliver of light disappeared and left them in the dimness of the bus. A lady in the seat in front of him shifted and whispered something to the man next to her. He reached up to the mini television in front of their seat and raised the volume on the news channel that it was on.

“— continue to enforce anti-EM regulation all across the South that requires EMs to register themselves and parents to enroll their kids in specialized boarding schools. In Seattle, the heart of the Empower movement, the Bergman Defenders continue to obstruct anti-EM corporations. Mark Bryan, the director of Project Salvida who is working closely with the city in favor of limiting EM abilities has this to say about it.”

“The explosion that killed three innocent people and injured countless more in Japan last month; the pro-EM riots in Paris that took armed forces to the streets; the bombing of a government

building in Brazil after they instated a law that requires the enforcement of ADRs on every EM,” the man’s voice spilled venom, and it caused George’s throat to tighten.

“These people are dangerous! Supporters of the Empower movement want to limit the right of ordinary folk who only want to protect themselves and their families. It’s even in the name. Do you mean to tell me they want to empower these people who have proven time and time again that their abilities are dangerous and unstable? For what? So they can overthrow our government? Hijack our media? Our lives?”

“Project Salvida is hosting a convention in the coming week to raise funds for one of its projects that—” The channel switched to an old romance movie, only leaving behind a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“They’re assholes is what they are.”

George turned to Dream when he realized he had awoken. On the seats beside them, Skeppy and Sapnap were both still asleep. Sapnap’s mouth was open wide enough to catch the fly buzzing around them.

“We should have a say in this. They forget we’re citizens too,” Dream muttered.

“I’m not.”

“You know what I mean.”

George nodded and fiddled with a thread poking out of the armrest. He hated discussing the topic of Extramundane movements, mostly because it reminded him of the number of people who despised him for existing.

Despite how confining it was, the island had always been the safest place for George. It was like a refuge frozen in time where he could avoid hearing about the persecution and hate for their people. But they were in the real world now, and George, once again, felt like an imposter among the common folk like he had all those years ago the day his parents had surrendered him to AGE.

“I think the Bergman Defenders are heroes,” Dream said. “They give those shitty companies and assholes like Bryan who talk about us like we’re the bad guys what they deserve.”

At Dream’s anger, the muscles on his neck and shoulders tensed, and not having the energy to power through it, he pulled their mind block up. A crowded and cramped bus was the worst place for his powers to lash out.

He glanced back at the TV to distract him. It was a candy commercial about a lone boy in the playground of a school who shared a chocolate bar with a classmate to befriend them.

He remembered his fifth birthday when he had seen an older girl grow a dandelion in the playground, and he had watched her smile and offer him the flower as a gift; he had always struggled to talk to other kids back then, and the joy of a new friend had made him decide it was his favorite flower.

Then he remembered the way his mother had tugged him aside and told him not to interact with *those bad people*. He remembered the answer she had given him when he had asked what made them so bad.

“They only bring trouble, love. Promise me you will be careful around them, alright? You should never get too close.”

He pursed his lips and blurted out, "I don't know if I agree with the way they do things though."

Dream stared at him like he had just been slapped. "Why wouldn't you? You of all people, George?"

"It's only giving us a worse reputation." He shrugged. "More reasons for them to hate us."

"So you'd rather do nothing and pretend it's all fine?" Dream snapped, and the wave of exasperation and outrage that slashed through George was strong enough to take down their mind block.

He tightened his grip on the loose piece of thread until it ripped off the seat. "I didn't say that."

"The only way to change things is by standing up for ourselves."

Energy verged on his fingertips. A luggage bag crashed in the hallway, and the man in front of them yelped, glanced at it in confusion, and got up to push it back into place.

"*Not here,*" George hissed through gritted teeth.

He closed his eyes, pressed the back of his head hard against his seat, dug his nails into the armrest, and tried to focus on anything besides the riled-up emotion threatening to burst out of him.

The book he was reading. The tires scratching against the road. The baby in the front bursting into tears again. The couple in front of them who had begun to argue.

Dream released a contemptuous snort. His aura began to fade as he pulled up their mind block again. "I'll be back," he muttered.

When he calmed his breathing, George opened his eyes in time to see Dream raise his hood and make his way toward the back of the bus. The couple in front of them turned off the television, and with their argument now having ceased, the bus fell into silence.

Skeppy stirred awake, and for a moment, he looked like he had just awoken from a surreal dream. Worry was a strange sight for Skeppy considering the quirk of mischief and the energetic way he carried himself. Most especially, it was odd because Skeppy was one of the biggest optimists he knew next to Bad.

Unsure of what to say but still wanting to reassure him, George settled for saying, "We're going to find him."

Skeppy seemed startled when he heard George speak, and he quickly slipped on a smile and let out a strained, "Of course, we will."

But George could feel the alarm veiling beneath a layer of snark and confidence. However, since Skeppy didn't seem comfortable opening up, he chose not to comment. Instead, he said, "It's Bad." He smiled. "He's a tough cookie. How do you think he's survived all of your dumb pranks?"

The comment earned a snicker out of Skeppy. "Yeah," is all he chose to reply with, and he turned away from George.

He doesn't deserve this.

George hadn't realized he had been so focused on Skeppy until the thought popped into his mind. Although he wanted to agree, he figured Skeppy wouldn't appreciate George reading his mind,

even if it was on accident, so he swallowed his words and looked the other way, the faint echo of Bad's laughter remaining in the background of his thoughts.

His heart leapt out of his chest and feeding off both Skeppy's dread and his own concern, his emotions ached to break out. He contained them—locked them away in the abyss of his mind and tossed away the key. Then he grazed the curtains open again. The sun had descended, and greyness had overtaken the fields of wheat scrolling past them.

A gentle rumble growled in the sky and a flash of white struck the lands. Tiny specks hit the window, and the once beautiful blue skies hollered in pain. They gradually quickened until the pitter-patter on the glass sounded like the rhythm of a forsaken lullaby. As he let the curtains shut, he rested his head on his seat, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. Next to him, he felt Dream slump onto his seat, silent as ever.

He dozed off to the sound of a thunderstorm brewing behind the horizon.

"Do you guys want to help me get back at Vurb?" Skeppy interrupted George and Sapnap's conversation when he came in between them during passing period and slid both arms around their shoulders.

They exchanged a questioning gaze before Sapnap hesitantly asked, "What did he do?"

"He filled Bad's dorm room with cups of liquid laxatives yesterday." He shook his head with a snort. "Let's just say Bad realized it wasn't actually water a little too late."

Sapnap paused in the middle of the hallway and started cackling, inclining on the wall next to him to keep steady as he did. When George joined him in his laughter, Skeppy crossed his arms and waited for them to stop.

"Don't you love trolling Bad? Why would you want to get back at Vurb?" asked George.

Skeppy and Bad had a unique dynamic, and even with his empathy, he never understood how the two vastly different friends fit together so well.

"Because..." With a frown, Skeppy tried hard to come up with an answer.

"He just hates the fact someone else has Bad's attention," Sapnap said through his laughter and swiped a small tear from his cheek.

"I'll help you sabotage Fundy's suit if you help me with this."

Sapnap's eyes lit up. He cleared his throat, hooked his arm around Skeppy's shoulders, and adopted an overblown tone when he said, "So about this proposition, Mr. Skeppy..." as he led them down the hallway.

George shook his head at his friends' immaturity and trailed behind them. As they walked, one of the classroom doors opened and Bad walked out. His face brightened when he caught sight of them.

"Hey, guys. What's up?"

Skeppy swiped his hand dismissively and moved past Bad with Sapnap at his other side. "A little busy at the moment, Bad, but I'll see you later."

They walked off without another word, leaving a laughing George and a confused Bad behind.

“What was that about?”

“I’m sure you’ll find out soon.” George rolled his eyes. He opened his locker to shove his bag inside. When he noticed Bad leaning against the lockers with a pensive look on his face, he curiously asked, “Hey, why are you and Skeppy like that?”

The question snapped Bad out of whatever haze he was in and he tilted his head the way a puppy would. “Like what?”

“Like he pranks you and you just kind of take it and then you fight but not really?” He inclined the side of his head against the lockers and frowned. Their dynamic had always been a mystery to him. Considering the amount of times Skeppy could drive Bad up the wall, he couldn’t figure out how they were always on good terms.

“Geppy just likes being a dumb potato.” Bad shook his head.

They fell into step with each other as they made their way to the mess hall. The sides of his lips caved in like he was fading into a fond memory.

*“Have you two ever **really** fought though?”*

“Of course we have.” Bad laughed. “What kind of friends don’t? I remember this one time my family picked me up for the summer early, and I didn’t have time to say goodbye because the ferry was leaving. Skeppy was so mad when he called me the next day. Like I don’t think I’d ever heard him angry. Then he made me promise I’d never do it again.”

“He was angry because you left without saying bye even though you could’ve just said it through the phone?” George snorted. Of course Skeppy would be one to do that—he chased after Bad like a lost puppy no matter how many times he got scolded for his shenanigans.

Bad hummed in agreement and glanced out the window they were passing with a smile.

“Back then, he was just the annoying muffin who liked to mess with the shy guy who sat in the back of the class. I didn’t realize he actually cared. That’s when I started making an effort to treat him more like a friend.”

“Seems like a weird way to start a friendship.”

“Friends are weird like that. Sometimes you wonder if you made them up because there’s no way you got lucky enough to find someone who cares that much about little ol’ you.”

He was right. Since he was young, George had never been good at making friends, and he had lost all hope when he had arrived at AGE. Yet somehow the universe had put two idiots in his way, and George would never understand why they cared about him so much when it was easier to be friends with people who didn’t carry his kind of baggage.

He sighed and glanced out the window to admire the pretty spring afternoon—flowers blooming in the bushes, a flock of birds migrating, and two rabbits chasing each other in between the tall blades of grass. A tender warmth enveloped his chest.

“I guess they are,” he said.

Behind them, a familiar voice shouted his name. His swift footing was audible even from a

distance. When George met his gaze, his beam grew impossibly big and his eyes twinkled with that familiar sparkle.

“George!” Dream shook him awake, and it took a second for George to drift into consciousness.

The bus had stopped, and the passengers were starting to remove their luggage from the overhead.

After making their way out, they hitched a ride to Dream’s getaway house. It was a comfortable two-story shack in the forest. The honey oak structure and wooden foundation made it look like a tree house built on the ground. The potted plants lined in the front porch complemented the surrounding nature and breathed life into the home.

Dream had only mentioned this place a handful of times, but every time he did, he had spoken about it with more nostalgia and fondness than his house growing up. His stories had been bright recollections of playing in the woods until dusk and diving into the pond in the back and pretending to be the swamp monster from his comic books.

He had told George his fondest memory had been rocking in the hammock beside the driveway and watching the colors of the sunset descend into the canopy of trees and welcome the sea of stars—similar to what they had done at their tree on the island. It was only here that George understood where the extent of Dream’s love for nature stemmed.

The air was thick with post-rain humidity and faint rumbles still growled behind the clouds. The scent of pine was overwhelming. It was like he could smell Dream all around him.

When they got to the front porch, Dream pulled out a key from one of the potted plants and unlocked the door.

“Dude, this is awesome. You’re telling me your parents can afford having a place like this?” Sappnap exclaimed while spinning in a circle in the middle of the entrance hall which had a semi-large staircase on the side and three arches leading to the hallway, the living room, and the kitchen.

“It’s a family house. Technically, it’s not just for my parents.” Dream tossed the keys into the bowl by the entrance. Behind them, the rainshower that had just broken out became muffled when he shut the door.

“So what you’re saying is your family has money?” Skeppy said while examining a photo of Dream’s family.

The massive portrait took center stage in the room. Dream’s parents were standing side by side while a younger Dream sat on a sofa with his little sister next to him. His father’s hand was resting on Dream’s shoulder, and with his stern gaze and flat mouth, he didn’t look like a friendly man. On the other side of the spectrum, his mother’s gleaming smile was a vibrant white, and it resembled Dream’s present smile a lot more. His little sister, who didn’t seem to be any older than three in the photo, was distracted with her stuffed animal. Finally, there was Dream whose expression was a shadow of his crooked smile, and his posture was tense and rehearsed. He looked like a stranger in his own home. George’s throat tightened when he recognized the feeling.

“We’ll head out after breakfast tomorrow. I have clothes and a stack of cash to buy us stuff on the way. We can take turns driving.”

“I can’t drive,” George pointed out.

“We,” Dream repeated, signaling to himself, Skeppy, and Sapnap, “can take turns driving and George can have nap time in the backseat.”

George huffed and muttered, “I’m not a baby,” but Dream continued speaking without acknowledging him.

“Any questions?”

Sapnap raised his hand.

“What?”

“Where’s your bathroom? I’ve been about to burst for like an hour now because I forgot to go on the bus.”

“It’s because you’re an idiot.” George said.

“Upstairs. Last door to your left.”

“Great,” Sapnap replied and tried to elbow George as he raced by him, but he dodged the motion with a laugh.

The rest of the evening was spent ravaging the cabinets for food and ordering pizza once they realized there weren’t many ingredients to cook dinner with. They huddled in the couches of the living room to watch old Disney films. At one point during their marathon, Dream, who had been sprawled on a blanket on the ground, excused himself to the kitchen to make more popcorn.

Since they had arrived, there had been a tense aura around Dream. More specifically, he was tense around George. It hadn’t become obvious until he opted out of sitting on the desolate spot in the sofa beside George and instead took refuge on the floor.

George could tell even Sapnap and Skeppy were taken aback by the motion, but neither commented on it. However, he didn’t miss the concerned passing glances Sapnap kept shooting him throughout the movie.

Hence, when he saw Dream head into the kitchen, George decided right then that he didn’t want to spend the trip stuck in an awkward and tense silence, so he took it as an opportunity to talk to him.

Dream’s back was to him when he stepped into the kitchen. He was drumming his fingers on the counter in front of the microwave and waiting for his popcorn to finish.

When he heard George come in, he shot him a questioning glance and stopped tapping his fingers. “Not excited to watch Mufasa die for the millionth time?”

George chuckled. The Lion King movies had been some of their favorite classics. He couldn’t count the amount of times they had rewatched them on chilly nights after Dream had climbed three stories up the side of his building to sneak into his dorm.

As he stepped closer, he rested both elbows on the kitchen bar and studied him in silence.

“What?” Dream asked.

“You’ve been quiet.”

Dream sighed and turned away from George, instead taking interest in the cross hanging above the dining table. Behind him, the kernels began to pop to the beat of the sluggish rain drops against the

window.

“It’s nothing.”

George scoffed. He debated whether he should try to lower their mind block to get a read on him but ultimately decided against it seeing as it was probably going to irritate Dream more.

“Is it really?”

Outside, a thunderbolt roared, and it caused the lights to flicker. The popping of the popcorn stopped a second before the microwave started beeping.

Dream ignored it. Instead, he crossed his arms and got comfortable in his spot.

“I just don’t understand why you’re so against defending our people—*your* people.” His murky yellow eyes locked onto George’s brown ones. “Yourself.”

The rain picked up.

George pressed his weight further into the counter like he was trying to lean closer despite the fact Dream was still standing across the room.

“I’m not against defending ourselves, but it doesn’t mean I believe disorder and breaking the law is what’s going to help us.”

“The law is bullshit.”

George didn’t try to counter him. He was right. It didn’t take a genius to figure out the law was grossly against their kind—often degrading them to something less than human and rendering them with harsher punishments for anything as simple as pick-pocketing.

With a heavy exhale, he replied, “Breaking the law gives them a worse image of us.”

The roaring storm outside matched the fury that burst out of Dream the second their mind block fell. “How else are we supposed to get anything done?”

His gaze alternated between Dream and the window beside him. The tree branches shuddered with the unruly wind and banged on the glass like they were trying to provoke them.

“Look. I know you have this big wish to defend people and change this country’s messed up views about us but if—” He paused to recover his breath, and his throat closed in. “Just... don’t forget our priority is saving Bad right now.”

Dream huffed. “I know that, George.” He ran a hand through his hair in aggravation, though it didn’t feel like it was aimed at him. Then he walked forward and leaned on the opposite side of the counter. “I won’t forget,” he responded in a calmer and more assuring tone.

The conversation ended there.

They stared at each other for a few seconds before Dream retreated to grab his popcorn. Sapnap made his entrance after that, strolling into the kitchen with a raised eyebrow and a curiosity-killed-the-cat kind of aura.

He shot George a questioning glance, but George refused to give him any sort of response.

“What’s the hold up? I’ve been out of popcorn for like straight up ten minutes,” he whined as if he

were suffering from months of starvation, but George knew that wasn't his reason for checking in with them.

When George snickered, Sapnap stuck his tongue out and George returned the motion. Dream stepped in between them with a bowl of popcorn in hand, and he sighed like a tired father handling his kids. It was obvious that he thought he was above their petty gestures, but he had never failed to play along when it was him bickering with Sapnap.

"Here. Knock yourself out," Dream said and passed the bowl to Sapnap who didn't waste a second to dig his whole fist in.

He crunched on the popcorn and looked between them. "Did I interrupt something?" he asked (miraculously after swallowing instead of talking with his mouth full like he always did).

"Lover's quarrel, maybe?"

George smacked his arm, and Sapnap was quick to shield his popcorn bowl.

Dream laughed and replied, "Just chit-chatting."

"Mhm." Sapnap's narrowed gaze indicated he didn't believe them, but he didn't push it. Instead, he gestured toward the picture of Dream's family on the counter. "How come we've never seen pictures of your family until now?"

Dream put a hand on his hip and rested his other on the counter. He shrugged. "It's never been a topic of conversation."

George's interest peaked at that. It had always been a topic the three of them avoided—family life tended toward that route with most of the students at AGE because many of them had been forced to attend or came from complicated backgrounds.

However, now, sitting in Dream's kitchen and getting a glimpse at his home life (even though it was a vague one), he realized how curious he was. After all, he had only ever caught a passing glance of Dream's parents the few times they had picked him up for the breaks.

"Looks like now it is." George raised both eyebrows and smiled at him. He made it a point to get comfortable on the chair beside Sapnap who followed his lead.

Dream stared at them. "Are we really doing this right now?"

"We want to know," Sapnap insisted, and he sent Dream his puppy-eye look. "Please?"

"Fine. What do you want to know?"

"Why were your parents so hesitant to enroll you in AGE?" George asked the first question before Sapnap could. As he did, he stole a few pieces of popcorn from Sapnap's bowl and he earned a slap on the hand.

Dream shrugged, and he also reached for the popcorn. He tossed one in the air and swiftly caught it with his mouth. He didn't seem affected by the question which George found was a good sign.

Though he was also an expert at hiding certain emotions and thoughts, even in the presence of his telepathic best friend. Truthfully, it had always bothered him how easily he could hide things from him.

“They don’t like the ‘bad influence’ it gives me. They don’t like me showing off my abilities either. They think they’re from the devil or something. It took a lot of me to convince them, but when it was obvious I couldn’t attend a normal school, they let me.”

“How did you?” It was Sapnap’s turn to ask a question.

“I told them if they’d let me stay, I would stop using my powers outside the island and pretend I’m normal.” His nose wrinkled. “Thanksgiving dinners are the worst to sit through. They love getting political about things. Always bashing those ‘dangerous freaks’ or whatever.”

“I know what you mean...” Sapnap said. They paused and waited for him to elaborate but he didn’t seem comfortable doing so. Instead, he asked his next question. “What does your sister think? Isn’t she like ten?”

Dream brightened at the mention of his sister. Smiling, he shook his head and responded with a reminiscing chuckle. “She thinks it’s the coolest thing ever. She found my comic collection years back, and she talked non-stop about how I could be the next Captain America if I really tried.”

“Like brother, like sister,” George replied with a smile that Dream returned.

“What are your parents going to do when they figure out we’ve stolen their money and taken their car on a road trip?” Sapnap asked, throwing another popcorn into his mouth and missing.

Dream’s eyes crinkled when he laughed. “They’ll probably kill me if we don’t die first.” Then he stepped away from the counter and stretched his arms. “But I’ll take being grounded for life in my premature coffin any day over leaving Bad to fend for him—” Dream’s sentence progressed into a yawn.

“We should head to bed,” George said. “Big day tomorrow.”

“Skeppy’s already snoring on the couch so...” Sapnap sent Dream a look. “Guess I’ll take the guest room?”

“Yeah. I’ll take my parent’s and George can sleep outside,” Dream replied without missing a beat.

The bemused twinkle in his eyes drove a scoff out of George. “Idiot. I’ll take your bedroom, thank you very much.”

“You sure you don’t want to nap outside, Georgie? Maybe the crickets can sing you to sleep,” Sapnap said.

George headed for the entrance hall, though not before slapping Sapnap on the back of the head one last time and rushing up the stairs before he could return it.

“No running in the house, children!” Dream called from downstairs just as George heard Sapnap stomping up the stairs behind him.

Unfortunately for George, his sleep consisted of an endless string of nightmare after nightmare, and one stuck out among the rest.

He was standing in a void of black—so dark he could barely see the silhouette of his hands when he raised them close to his face. The only discernable sound was the faint ticking of a grandfather clock echoing like it was hundreds of meters down a long corridor in front of him.

He tried to walk, but his feet were stuck to the ground. He could feel pitch-black tendrils snaking around his ankles like live serpents holding him still.

The eerie sensation of a shadow at his shoulder made him spin around in an instant, but as soon as he did, the presence moved to his front. No matter how much he twisted in his spot, he couldn't catch a glimpse of the entity.

Between hard breaths and with his heart pumping out of his chest, his voice came out uneven and shaky when he asked, "What are you?"

It didn't respond.

Instead, he felt the presence phase through his body from above—making it almost impossible for him to take in oxygen. He fell to his knees and slapped his palms against the freezing ground. More tendrils phased through the ground and chained his wrists. They sucked him in like parasitic black quicksand.

"Please—just—leave me alone!" he pleaded as more began to rise, and one slid into his open mouth and down his throat like it was trying to rip him up from the inside.

The more he struggled, the worse it became until his eyes burned, his throat was raw, and blood spilled from the sides of his mouth. He couldn't voice anything besides a muffled and wet shriek.

He woke up with a bang after he slipped off the bed. His covers were wrapped around both legs and he was sputtering out short and heavy gasps.

It took him a minute to catch his breath, and he felt disoriented looking around the unfamiliar room. The morning sun rays sneaking through the blinds rendered him sightless.

A knock at the door startled him, and he scrambled to his feet to open it. Dream was standing outside with sleep-deprived eyes and his chaotic morning hair on show.

"I heard a crash. Are you okay?" he asked.

George almost choked on his words from the rushed reply he tried to give, but he coughed and replied, "Fine."

Dream didn't seem convinced. He wiped his eyes and squinted to examine him more closely.

George's eyes landed on the hallway mirror propped on the coffee table behind Dream. He looked like a mess. His hair was pointing in every direction, and there was sweat all over his face, neck, and shirt.

"You look like crap," was all Dream said.

George scoffed. He looked away and replied, "I just had a nightmare is all."

Dream's stern gaze didn't waver, but instead of asking him to elaborate, he hummed and then followed it with a long yawn. "Gonna go cook breakfast. Go..." His eyes traced him over. "... take a shower or something. There's stuff in the drawers you can wear."

He disappeared down the stairs after that. George staggered back into the room, and he had to clutch the frame of the bed momentarily to snap himself out of his drowsy state.

Every time he blinked, he felt like he was returning to that void. He focused on the brim of light

peeking through the window. Behind him, an indistinct murmur chilled his neck, and he jerked around to frantically search the room.

When he didn't see anything, he wiped the sweat from his brow and noticed he was still breathing abnormal and his fingers were trembling.

You're fine, he told himself. *Everything's fine*. Even though every muscle in his body knew it wasn't.

He avoided his reflection in the dresser as he rummaged through the drawers until he found a shirt and a pair of adjustable black sweats. As he left the room and made his way down the hall to find the bathroom, he ran into Sapnap who had just walked out of the guest room.

"Woah," he made an abrupt stop and took a long look at George. "You look like shit."

"Thanks," was George's sarcastic remark.

"Rough night?"

"Yeah."

Sapnap patted his shoulder, crinkled his nose, and said, "Go shower. You smell like shit too."

At Sapnap's laugh, George pushed past him and locked himself in the restroom. He tried to ignore the unnerving presence stuck to his shadow as he showered.

A quick wash later and he was heading downstairs, a little calmer than before. However, occasionally, he would still hear the distant ticking from his nightmare resonating inside his head.

The sound of sizzling and the scent of bacon grease swarmed him as soon as he entered the kitchen. He was met with the oddly domestic scene of Dream dressed in a pink apron at the stove, Skeppy raiding the stuff in the fridge with a piece of toast in his mouth, and Sapnap trying to figure out how the waffle maker worked.

"Morning," Skeppy said while sliding into the chair beside George. He proceeded to spread jam onto his half-eaten toast and made a mess on his hands.

George turned up his nose but still replied with a quiet, "Morning."

He took in the view of the forest outside the window. There were wet and broken tree branches dancing to the wind that contrasted the heavy storm that had ravaged them overnight. A faded blue peaked in between the gaps atop the higher trees, and there were slivers of light slipping through to the beat of the breeze and making the raindrops stuck to the leaves sparkle.

The nausea he had awoken with dissipated, and he found himself breathing a little slower. His nightmare slipped to the back of his thoughts, and he allowed the wonders of a new day to take over.

He snapped out of it when Dream slapped a cup on the counter in front of him, and he regarded George with a twinkle of interest.

When he pulled the apple juice bottle from behind him and poured him a glass, George eagerly accepted it and almost downed it in one go, suddenly aware of how dry his mouth had been.

Dream was still staring him down with his elbows perched on the counter when George finished.

He was waiting for an explanation, but George wasn't about to discuss the nightmares that had started plaguing him the night they had found out about Bad. After all, nightmares was all they were.

"Have you been having any recent... difficulties handling your emotions? Any trouble with the negative ones in specific? Maybe nightmares, too?" Sarah's words echoed in his mind, but he forced himself to forget.

When George didn't offer a response and instead glanced at the pan on the stove, Dream gave a defeated sigh and pulled away to serve them breakfast, though not before sending him a we'll-talk-about-this-later look.

"Why are y'all so quiet?" Sappnap asked with a mouthful of apple. He seemed to have figured out the waffle situation and was now waiting for it to finish. He looked toward Dream and George suspiciously.

Skeppy shrugged. He wiped his hands on his dirty napkin and licked the bit of jam on his lips. "Maybe cause you finally decided to shut up."

"Ha-ha." Sappnap sounded unimpressed. "I could throw a fireball at you right now. It'll wake you right up."

"Please don't burn down the house. My parents will kill me twice if you do," Dream said. He then placed two plates on the counter and served them with eggs and bacon. He slid one toward George when he was done.

George didn't hesitate to dig in. "Since when do you know how to cook?"

"Since I had a sister."

"I thought you said there wasn't any food?"

"Drove to the shop five minutes away to get some supplies since we're going to need them. Might as well have a decent breakfast while we're at it."

"What's the plan, boys?" Sappnap asked. The waffle maker coughed up a cloud of smoke behind him.

"Sappnap!" Dream shoved him aside and opened it. He used a rag to blow out the smoke. George choked at the scene of Dream in his pink apron fanning the waffle maker like a housemother while Sappnap pouted beside him. "If you set the fire alarm off my parents will know we're here, idiot."

"Geez." Sappnap peeked over Dream's shoulder at his burnt waffles and then looked at Dream with a pleading gaze.

Dream sighed and split his serving in half to share with Sappnap because he knew George wasn't going to offer his. He wasn't wrong.

After all the potential crises were handled, he returned to his spot in front of George and Skeppy and set his tablet down to pull up a map.

"The drive from here to Seattle is fifty-two hours."

George choked on his juice again. "Fifty-two?"

“Welcome to the good ol’ US of A, Georgie.” Sapnap slumped onto the seat by Dream with a grin, his plate now empty and shining.

“We’re taking a route that will take us through Nashville, Denver, and Seattle, and we’ll be making stops along the way, preferably at smaller towns, for motels, food, and to stretch our legs.”

“It’d be so much faster if we just stole a plane...” Sapnap muttered.

“We are not stealing any planes. We’re trying not to drag attention to ourselves, remember?” said Dream.

“Hm... Maybe we shouldn’t have jumped off a cruise ship in that case?” Skeppy casually pointed out as he munched on some dry cereal George hadn’t even seen him grab. He signaled toward the TV.

The cartoon had been replaced by a breaking news report that alerted citizens of the county about the four Extramundane stowaways from a cruise who had been sighted at the bus station. Blurry pictures of their appearances were on display, though they weren’t clear enough to make-out, and it didn’t seem like they had figured out their names yet.

“Well, shit,” Sapnap said.

“What are we supposed to do now?” George asked in a panic.

One day. It had taken *one day* for them to be caught.

Dream exhaled and rubbed his temples. He turned toward them and said, “We head off as soon as possible. There are bags in the storage closet. Gather as many dry goods and drinks as you can. I’ll go get the money and keys.”

They got to work. George, Skeppy, and Sapnap started hoarding enough supplies to last them a couple of days on the road and moved them to the truck in the garage.

At one point, George was hauling a 32-pack of water when he almost tripped down the stairs, but Sapnap managed to hold him up. After he helped him load it in the truck, he took hold of George’s wrist, and when George glanced at him, he said, “Dream’s been taking a while. Maybe you should go check on him?”

There was a deeper concern enlaced in his words that confused George. He knew that Sapnap had caught onto their argument the night before, but seeing as Dream and George had dropped the topic, he hadn’t realized Sapnap was still worried about it.

George wasn’t sure what to make of his interest in it. It didn’t seem like Sapnap was just being nosy, and he hadn’t ever seemed this concerned about their fights before.

He decided to save the question for later and hummed in response. Then he headed upstairs to look for Dream. After searching most of the rooms, he felt Dream’s presence in the last room of the hallway.

When he pushed the door open, he spotted Dream sitting on the bed with his back to him. He was staring at something in his hands. Despite the bright pink aesthetic of the room, the flower portraits hung on the walls, and the white vanity mirror with pretty decor, a heavy aura weighed on the space.

It constricted his chest and made him lose his breath. The coldness of his shadow stalker returned

in the presence of negative emotions, and he clenched his fists, already exhausted from its unwavering presence.

Dream turned his head when he heard him come in, but he didn't say anything. Quietly, George walked into the room until he was facing him.

Dream was staring down at a portrait of his sister and tracing a finger over her shining smile. His hair was shrouding his eyes, but George wasn't sure he wanted to make eye contact considering the unsettling emotions seeping out of him had been enough to suffocate him.

As he sat down on the bed, he toyed with his fingers and listened to the sound of his own heartbeat and Dream's gentle breaths.

"My sister wanted to be an EM a long time ago," Dream started, pairing it with a barely audible snicker. George wasn't sure where the conversation was going, but he kept his mouth shut and listened. "She was so disappointed when she turned nine and her powers still hadn't manifested, but she never gave up hope."

Dream's gaze rose, and it landed on the pretty ballerina music box on the window. "Not until my parents finally exploded on her and asked why she'd ever want to be like *those freaks*. I'd never seen her look angrier."

A tree branch outside rattled with the wind, and it tapped on the window at a sluggish pattern. George channeled his focus on it in an attempt to close himself off to the overpowering nostalgia pouring out of Dream. He couldn't deal with the intensity of his emotions right now—not when their negativity seemed to empower his invisible stalker.

"She said she wanted to be a hero like me. It's when I decided that nothing would stop me from doing everything I could to help people like us—kids like us."

George wasn't sure how to answer. Although Dream had expressed his need to save their people countless times, he had never shared his reasons. George had always assumed it was an innate trait of his—that this need to protect arose from Dream's natural heroic tendencies. That he was just a good person who knew what the right thing to do was, and he was better than all of them for striving to be a hero.

He had assumed it was why he had defended George when they were younger. He had never once thought it had been his upbringing and his family's influence that had motivated him into his heroic mindset in such an unexpected way.

"Things are really bad right now. Everywhere. The south. The north. All over the country. I know you haven't been out of the island in a long time and I'm not sure how things look in Britain but..." There was a crack in his voice. "It's only gotten worse."

The silence between them felt like a layer of thin ice on the verge of shattering. George knew exactly what Dream's next words were, and yet he still didn't feel ready for them. He wanted so desperately to be back at the island sitting by their tree, laughing and joking about old times and watching the sun fall.

"I know you don't want to get involved, George... but I can't promise you I won't intervene if I see something. Not when I've made a promise to myself."

"To help people?"

"To help *our people*."

George pressed his lips together. He didn't meet his eyes even though he could feel Dream's gaze drilling a hole through him. He reached up and grazed his fingertips against the edges of his pendant.

Almost a minute passed before George replied, "You realize that we're risking not only the mission but also our lives? Especially now that we're on the news... if we get caught—" His breath hitched when he felt the shadow wrap around his shoulders like two freezing hands reaching around his neck from behind. More agitatedly, he said, "There's no guarantee AGE or our parents will be able to get us out of trouble. Especially when I'm—"

He ran out of breath too quickly to finish his sentence.

Dream understood though. They all did. With the rising legislation against EMs, especially in the south, being detained, thrown in jail, or worse, locked up in a facility infamous for its horrendous treatment of their people wasn't unheard of, even for the slightest misdemeanor—robbery, assault, disrespecting authority or resisting arrest.

There was no doubt in his mind that breaking into a facility to save Bad would put them at risk of that, especially because George was now the only legal adult of the group.

A single mistake, and his—*their*—lives would be over.

It took a second for Dream to respond, but when he did, his answer was a punch to the gut, and it left a nauseating feeling in his stomach. His throat closed in and he gripped his pendant so tight the sharp edges dug into his skin.

"I know, but we knew that when we started this journey. We knew that when we decided we had to save Bad. Why does it have to be any different when it involves helping other people too?"

He was right.

He was right, and George hated it.

He hated it because it exposed everything he didn't want to admit about himself. He hated it because it reminded him that he was a coward—that the only reason he had agreed to do this was because it was his friend on the line.

But if it had been anyone else, he wouldn't have risked the only semblance of a normal life that he had—a life that didn't involve being locked in a white cell because he decided to be a hero.

Because George wasn't a hero, and he was never going to be one.

Dream set his hand above his. Their eyes locked, and Dream said, "I would *never* put you in danger if I didn't trust what I was doing."

George forced a smile, but he couldn't keep his bottom lip from trembling and his eyes from glossing over. He released his pendant and pressed his palm above Dream's. "I know that," he said.

Returning his smile, Dream stood up, and he placed his sister's portrait back on her bedstand. He took a moment to straighten his posture and take a deep breath. His gaze was firm when he looked at George. His eyes shined with a determination so familiar yet spiked with a ferocity George had never seen in him.

"Whatever happens, we'll do everything we can to save Bad, and we'll make it home together in no time. That's a promise."

Chapter End Notes

Important Announcements: Unfortunately, college is kicking my ass so I'm going to have to cut down on the updates, not to mention I only have three chapters written ahead from this point, and I want to deliver quality and minimal plot holes, so **I'm going to take a one to two-month break from updating**, both to get my stuff together and to write something meaningful y'all will enjoy.

I'm going to be fully transparent with y'all. This story isn't where I want it to be both in writing and engagement at the moment. I have a solid foundation and a lot of ideas, and I know where it's going, but I guess I've finally gotten past the "honeymoon" stage if you'd call it, and it's been getting progressively harder to motivate myself as I write.

Thank you everyone who has supported it, shared it, commented, kudo'ed and read! Y'all are literally my life support in this! You make all the work and time I put into it so worth it!

I'll see y'all in a few months. I'll still be active on twitter and tumblr so my DMs and asks are always open for anything you need/want to talk about. Love y'all! :)

Que tengan un hermoso día,
Light

[tumblr](#) & [twitter](#)

Georgie's First Visit to Georgia

Chapter Notes

Starting off with a short update but I hope it's enjoyable! Grav and Grass, I literally can't thank y'all enough for all the help you provide. Y'all are the best! <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The drive to Georgia was as irritating as George had predicted. Yet, miraculously, he somehow managed to get some of his book reading done despite Sapnap's constant and exaggerated "are-we-there-yet's" (which he was doing on purpose), Skeppy's insistence to change the radio station every five minutes, and Dream occasionally slamming the steering wheel every time a car blocked his lane.

And what's more, they quickly discovered that lady luck wasn't on their side.

The truck broke down three hours into their drive through the middle of nowhere, so they had no choice but to push the old vehicle a few miles down the road (correction: Dream forced Skeppy and George to push while he sat on the wheel and Sapnap remained at a safe distance away from burning down their only means of transportation).

It was until mid-afternoon that they reached some semblance of civilization (or at least something that bore on the definition of civilization).

It was a dead-end town with a forgettable name in the countryside. Even in the light of the afternoon sun, most of the downtown buildings were run-down and slowly being engulfed by shrubs, vines, and uncut grass. The roads were desolate, and the wind sang its lonesome melody to the invading flora. George would've thought it was a ghost town had it not been for the sole, dilapidated mechanic shop at an intersection with a buzzing open sign hung at the front.

"You know, when you told us you had a ride, I was kinda expecting something that would actually work," Sapnap grumbled when they finally managed to park the truck outside the establishment.

"Eh, beggars can't be choosers." Dream gave a shrug before he opened the door. The bell at the front dinged.

"Hello?" Skeppy asked when they walked inside. "Helloooo? Anybody home?"

They ambled through the dusty and cramped room which looked like a mix between a mechanic and an old item's shop. As he weaved through the aisles, George slid his finger over the wooden tables and the artifacts on display.

A forlorn gust of wind grazed the back of his neck, and as goosebumps ran down the sides of his arms, he found himself looking at the closed door behind him. He hugged himself when he caught the haunting murmurs of the voice in his nightmares like the wind's voice was a herald to an inevitable disaster.

It's all in your head, he reassured himself as he held his pendant tight and blinked his eyes shut. Nothing's going to go wrong as long as you keep yourself in check.

I don't suggest you try anything risky. Sarah's words echoed in his head. *Not with the way your abilities appear to be affecting you.*

The sound of shuffling near the counter caught their attention. An old man swiped open the curtain covering the archway behind the register and scrutinized them with his expression etched into a cranky frown.

The man released a mix between a cough and a clear of his throat while stepping toward the counter. As his eyes skimmed them, he scrunched his nose in disgust.

“What do you kids want?”

Dream stepped up, unfazed by the man's grumpy demeanor and brash tone. “Our truck broke down, and we need someone to take a look at it.”

The man looked over Dream's shoulder to eye the truck parked outside skeptically before he met his eyes again. “It'll cost you.”

“We have money.”

He gave a loud sigh and then let out an unpleasant and ashy snort like he was used to smoking one too many cigarettes during his day. He pushed past them carelessly, and Dream followed with his hands in his pockets. The rest of them trailed behind him like three little ducklings shielding themselves from the intimidating man.

After opening the hood and giving it a quick glance, the man grumbled something under his breath. He lowered it and said, “Seems like the battery's fried. Easy replacement.”

“Great.” Dream smiled until the man continued.

“You'll have to wait a few hours. I ain't getting another shipment 'till evening.”

“Aren't you in a mechanic's shop? Shouldn't you like always have batteries available?” Sapnap asked in a hesitant tone. When the man turned to him with a scowl, George had the urge to slap Sapnap for putting his foot in his mouth.

The man narrowed his eyes. He crossed his arms and grimaced. “Do you want it fixed or not?”

“Yep! Please ignore him.” Dream chuckled nervously and put both hands on Sapnap's shoulders to shove him aside so as to not rile the man further.

They left the truck in the man's care and made their way down the sidewalk aimlessly, scanning the nearby shops and restaurants. In the end, they decided to use their time shopping for snacks and clothes. Seeing as most of the clothes were overpriced, they settled for some inexpensive used shirts they could wear for the next day until they found a cheaper retailer.

Eventually, they found themselves walking down a strip of shops in silence. Dream was strolling at a comfortable pace next to George while Sapnap and Skeppy walked behind them.

It was a nice walk at least, until one of the doors burst open and smacked George in the forehead, sending him tumbling backward. Sapnap and Skeppy burst into snickers and Dream into tea-kettle mode. Meanwhile, George whined and rubbed the spot gently, glaring at his friends as he did.

A short, middle-aged woman exited the shop with a brown paper grocery bag, and her big smile faltered when she noticed the boys, more specifically, George who was still massaging the red spot

on his forehead.

“Oh goodness! I am so sorry. I didn’t see you there,” she blabbered while hurriedly setting her bag down.

Then she broke into George’s personal bubble when she put her hands on both his cheeks and started rotating his head to look for any bruises. George winced and tried to pull away, but the woman had a strong grip.

“Oh, honey, are you alright? I didn’t hurt you too bad, did I?”

“Uhm, I think I’m fine—” George sputtered, frozen to his spot with wide eyes that only made his friends laugh harder.

She furrowed her eyebrows and took a step back, somewhat taken aback. “Well, I’ll be. I don’t believe I’ve ever run into a British person in this town. You’re not from around here, are you?”

George felt seen under the woman’s insistent gaze, and he shook his head. He slightly turned toward his friends to avoid eye contact as if she could somehow read his mind and figure out they were wanted fugitives.

After Dream managed to calm his wheezes, he cleared his throat and regained his composure, though it wasn’t before flashing George an amused grin. George could barely contain his impulse to slap him, but he didn’t want to drag any more attention to them than needed.

“No. We’re just passing through, ma’am. Our truck broke down, so we’re just taking a walk.”

The woman perked up at that. Beaming, she raised her bag into her arms and looked between the boys. “How unfortunate.” She offered each of the boys her hand and shook them a little too enthusiastically, introducing herself as Martha.

“Where are your parents?” she asked.

George tensed at the sound of the question and he glanced toward his friends in a panic, but they all seemed to be keeping it together.

Describing his emotional state as on edge would have been an understatement. Even having a conversation with a shopkeeper or anybody on the street felt like they were in a ticking time bomb. It didn’t help that the images of the people in the cruise were etched into his mind.

Even though he had struggled with a similar feeling during his time at AGE, now that he was in the real world surrounded by regular people, George felt like he was crawling through a field of mines.

“We’re travelling by ourselves,” Dream answered.

Martha responded with a skeptical eyebrow raise. “Four unaccompanied young men travelling through a small town?”

George interlocked his hands and avoided her gaze. He started counting in his head to ease himself while he waited for the conversation to end.

“Uh, yeah.” Dream let out a tense chuckle. He didn’t seem sure of what to say next.

George shifted on his heels and tried to keep his emotions to himself. For a moment, Martha scrutinized them, and George had the urge to run and hide before she could call their authorities.

Fortunately, her smile grew wider, and she changed the topic. However, George didn't feel comfortable with the peculiar and inquisitive look she sent him.

"Are you boys eating anywhere tonight?"

"Nope," Sapnap answered for them a little too quickly, but the flash of warning in Dream's eyes made him shut up.

"Why don't you boys come eat dinner at my house? It's only a few blocks from here, and it's just my daughter and I today. We have enough food to feed a whole orphanage."

The corners of her eyes and mouth wrinkled as she cackled at her own joke and slapped Dream's wrist lightly.

Dream's eyes landed on him for help, and George shook his head. Dream looked toward Martha with a tense smile and said, "It's really not a problem. We can just—"

"Oh for the Lord's sake, that's nonsense! I insist."

When she put her palm on George's shoulder, all the muscles in his body stiffened. Dining at a complete stranger's home sounded like a terrible idea, especially when they weren't sure how she would react if she figured out they were EM fugitives.

"Take it as an apology for smacking you poor thing."

He met Dream's eyes again, and he silently begged him to refuse, but Sapnap answered within the time it took Dream to hesitate.

"That sounds like a great invitation, ma'am. We accept."

As Dream directed him a glare, Sapnap responded with his I-know-what-I'm-doing grin that usually preceded a certain disaster.

"Wonderful. Follow me, boys."

The woman happily hooked her arm with George's and started walking. George sent his friends a frantic look; however, Sapnap and Skeppy seemed to be thoroughly enjoying his suffering, and Dream sighed with a faint smile and shrugged like there was nothing he could do.

"What could go wrong?" Sapnap whispered behind him while Martha blabbered something about their formally lively and beautiful town.

Martha's home was a small two-story house in a calm and bright neighborhood that looked almost like a different place when compared to their crumbling downtown. Bushes of vibrant flowers were lined in the front yard and a rocking chair was swaying to the breeze. The freshly-cut grass made George's nose crinkle.

The front door opened into the living room where there hung a few family portraits and various crosses. Several vanilla-scented candles were lit in different corners of the room. The kitchen was attached to the living room, and the mix of vanilla and the scent of a tender home-cooked meal permeated the cozy ambient. The eerie perfection of it all didn't help his growing concern that something could go wrong at any second.

"Amara! Come down, darling. We have some lovely visitors eating with us today," she called up the stairs.

Then she scanned the four awkward boys standing by the front door and stifled a laugh. She gestured for them to take a seat in the living room.

Dream and George sat beside each other on the sofa in front of the television while Skeppy and Sapnap sat on the one by the window. Martha turned on the television which was set to a local news channel.

“Would you boys like something to drink?”

“I’ll take some water, please,” Sapnap said after no one spoke.

“Of course, honey. I’ll be right back. Feel free to change the channel.”

As soon as she disappeared into the kitchen, they huddled toward the coffee table in the middle.

“Sapnap. What were you thinking?” George was the first to talk.

“That we might as well take all the free food we can get.”

Dream sent a skeptical glance toward the woman in the kitchen who was humming a quiet tune. He hesitated before saying, “She seems harmless. We might as well take advantage now that we’re here.”

“Why would any stranger be this kind, though?” George asked.

“It just looks like a bad case of Southern hospitality to me.” Sapnap dismissed it with a shrug. He shuffled back into the cushions and pinned his hands behind his head. “Just relax, dude.”

George glared, but before he could say anything else, Dream replied, “I mean, maybe he’s right? What could a harmless middle-aged Southern woman do to us?”

“Don’t underestimate the power of the mythical being they used to call a Karen.” Skeppy shook his head like he was reliving some sort of traumatic experience.

George rolled his eyes, crossed his arms, and pressed his back against the couch with a glare. Why weren’t they taking him seriously? Then again, he hadn’t sensed anything off coming from her. It was more so that after the cruise, he couldn’t help the feeling that everyone knew who they were. It was only a matter of time before it came true.

“Y’all need to stop overreacting,” said Sapnap with a snicker, and he playfully punched Skeppy on the ribs who responded by shoving him back.

George let out a deep breath and pressed his palms into his knees. Maybe his friends were right. He was overreacting. As long as they maintained their cover and as long as George kept his powers in check, there was absolutely nothing that could go wrong. All they had to do was get through dinner with a middle-aged Southern woman without giving themselves away, and they would walk away harm-free. It was as easy as that.

George just had to keep calm to prevent his powers from going out of whack. It was what he had trained for all those years—handling his abilities in stressful situations. He had this. Sure, he had nearly lost control back on the cruise, but this time it would be different.

Despite it, his stomach was still doing somersaults, and the more he tried to reassure himself, the more uncertain he felt. At any moment, one mistake could have the authorities at the front door ready to commit him into a facility.

Even the slightest stressor could set you off, Sarah had told him.

When he caught sight of the video playing on the TV, his heart stopped.

George's voice trembled when he called out, "Dream."

He didn't take his eyes off the screen when he slapped his leg to gain his attention.

A clip of their cruise exit was playing on a special report segment. The news lady was talking over it and stating there was an ongoing search in the state of Florida for the EM fugitives who had snuck into the country. Another male voice joined her in discussing the potential breach of national security it could pose.

As he glanced toward Dream with uncertainty, he watched as his expression shifted from amusement to confusion to alarm in the course of three seconds.

At the sound of Martha's rushed footsteps, Dream scrambled for the remote and barely managed to change the channel to some random soap opera. He disguised his panic with a shaky smile when Martha approached with a water pitcher and some glasses.

George stiffened when she took the chair closest to him. He wiped the sweat off his forehead. It felt like an electric current was traveling through his skin.

Breathe, he told himself.

She served them four glasses of water and placed them on the coffee table; then, she sat back and smiled fondly.

"I brought you all water in case you want some."

Dream thanked her and took one. Although he sounded calm and collected, George didn't miss the barely noticeable crack at the end of his sentence.

He could feel Dream's aura slipping away as he pulled his emotions back, meaning he was more nervous than he was letting on. He was glad that Skeppy and Sapnap hadn't yet caught on to the tension since they had been too busy babbling to notice the TV. George couldn't deal with three nervous auras caving in on him.

George reached for a glass and downed it in record time, yet he still felt thirsty. The room felt unpleasantly warm, and the humidity (or perhaps it was his sweat) stuck to the inside of his shirt was starting to smother him.

"So what brings you boys around here?" Martha continued to steal curious glimpses at George.

"We're on a road trip," Dream said.

"Are you?" Martha raised her eyebrows. "What would a couple of handsome, young gentlemen be doing on a road trip without your parents?"

"We're just showing George our beautiful country," Sapnap responded when he saw Dream hesitate.

Martha's eyes landed on him again, and he pretended to look busy admiring her home decor.

"I see. Where are you from, George?"

He tried to keep his tone straight when he replied, "London."

"Oh, my sister traveled there during the holidays." Martha sat back on her chair and shook her head. "She said it's more restrictive there nowadays, isn't it? I heard all the kids have to go through these screenings for those god-awful EM genes." She clicked her tongue and inspected her nails. "I don't understand why America can't just match up to European standards to keep the schools safe. If I were me, I'd remove my baby from the range of any of those freaks."

George dug his nails into his pants. From the other couch, Sapnap choked on his spit and covered it up with a cough.

Dream cleared his throat. "Our country is handling things slowly compared to others..." His voice was strained. It sounded practiced and plastic, but the cutthroat edge was obvious to anybody who knew him.

"Exactly," Martha said, shaking her head disapprovingly. She directed George another questioning look, and it felt like his airway was shrinking. "Do you attend school in London?"

"Um, no. I got to school here."

"Oh, really? Where?"

He gripped the glass and tried to take another sip, but it was empty. Thankfully, Dream stepped in. "We go to school in Florida. It's a small preparatory boarding school. Not very well-known."

She looked impressed. "Well-educated, I see. That sounds expensive. You boys must be very popular with the ladies, huh?"

Skeppy coughed up his water and slammed his cup on the wooden table with too loud of a thunk. Sapnap avoided eye contact and feigned ignorance. George didn't think they had ever been stuck in such an uncomfortable conversation.

Thankfully, they didn't have to come up with a response seeing as they were interrupted by the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs.

"Oh, wonderful timing!" Martha exclaimed with a beam. "Come down, darling."

A pretty short brunette strolled into the living room. Her arms were crossed and her face looked flushed like she was embarrassed by her mother's overenthusiasm for the guests. George couldn't say he blamed her.

"This is my daughter, Amara. Say hi, honey."

Amara sent them a timid wave and sat by her mother.

"My Amara is at the top of her class at her school. Though I wish she had a better place to really shine. She's really talented, aren't you, Amara?"

The girl didn't answer. Her face grew a shade darker and she sputtered, "Mom..."

"No need to be shy, sweetheart. These are some fine gentlemen from a prestigious academy in Florida. Very well-educated, and George also happens to be British." She sent her daughter a not-so-subtle wink. George wanted to die.

"Oh my God," Amara breathed out and covered her face.

George also felt himself grow a deeper shade of red. He pressed his heels hard on the wooden floorboards and avoided peeking at Sapnap and Skeppy who he could hear were doing everything to restrain their snickers. He knew for a fact this day would be burned into a traumatic memory in his mind. His powers felt like they were at the edge of bursting from all the uncomfortable emotions swamping him.

“Oh my.” Martha laughed and gave herself a light slap on the forehead. “How did I forget? The news is on right now. They happen to have a very handsome gentleman who announces the weather.”

When Martha reached for the remote on the table, George saw his life flash before his eyes, and he jolted forward and slapped it off the table while shouting, “No!”

Everyone went silent.

Martha and her daughter stared at George in shock. His heart climbed up his throat, and his pulse was deafening in his ears. The glasses on the coffee table began to rattle as he became more agitated.

Dream slapped his hand on the table to stabilize it and broke the silence with an awkward laugh. “George is just a little excited to talk is all.”

“Yeah, he doesn’t talk to many people but us,” Sapnap added in an instant, both covering for him and mortifying him. Although George had the urge to punch him, he knew it was better than Martha getting suspicious and changing the channel only to find out there were four EM fugitives who looked eerily similar to the guests she was hosting.

“Oh, well, in that case...” Martha sounded more eager. “Why don’t you tell me a little bit more about yourself? Do your parents live in England? Why did they send you over here?”

George didn’t think the questioning could get any worse, but Martha seemed to continually prove him wrong. He shifted sideways and stared at the ground. He was on the verge of an explosion. Beside the TV, the china plates on display in her bookshelf were starting to rattle too.

“Um...” his voice sounded desperate. His thoughts were tangling together, and the only outcome he could envision was losing control and being caught. Or worse, if he didn’t keep his emotions in check quickly, someone could end up hurt.

Dream shifted closer to him and their arms brushed. George tried to breathe in the soothing waves his aura was offering, but he was unable to clear his mind with the way Martha was staring him down.

“George doesn’t like talking about his parents,” Dream said.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Martha forced a smile and switched topics. “You know, my Amara has always wanted to visit Europe, haven’t you, honey?”

George’s desperate gaze landed on the clock only to find they had barely been sitting there for twenty minutes.

At the sound of water spilling in the kitchen, Martha yelped and scrambled to her feet to turn the stove off, leaving the boys awkwardly sitting by Amara.

“I am *so* sorry about my mom. We don’t get a lot of visitors, and she’s a little desperate for conversation,” Amara stammered as soon as her mom was out of hearing range.

Sapnap flashed George a teasing smile. “Don’t worry. George doesn’t get this much attention from the ladies this often anyway.”

George was ready to kill him.

“Sapnap’s an idiot,” Dream was the one to answer. “Truth is that George is unavailable.”

The confession gained three absolutely flabbergasted looks from all of them. Dream’s expression looked unreadable as he stared at Amara. His next statement almost gave him a heart attack, and he barely kept enough of a grip on his emotions to keep the chinaware from shattering.

“Sorry, we should’ve told your mother earlier, but George and I are kind of together. So, uh, we’d appreciate it if she toned it down a little.”

“Say wha—” Sapnap’s mouth was clamped shut by Skeppy who released an awkward snicker when Amara looked their way.

“Huh?” she asked.

Dream laughed, calm and collected, and there was not a hint of anxiety when he replied, “Yeah. We’re dating. George is just a little shy about it.”

“Oh.” Amara’s eyes grew impossibly wide.

Martha returned with an apron, a rag on her hands, and a warm smile. She clapped her hands, and the sound was muffled by the fabric.

“Dinner’s ready. Why don’t we all take a seat?”

It took everyone a second to process the situation before they got on their feet. When they settled at the table, Martha served them a plate of baked chicken, potatoes, and salad. She sat down and said a quick prayer before digging in.

As they ate, George, Skeppy, and Sapnap exchanged glances between each other. George tried to gain Dream’s attention, but he was too busy keeping up his plastic smile and talking to Martha.

“So, George. Are you planning to live in America when you graduate?” Martha resumed her ceaseless questioning.

A potato got stuck at the back of his throat, and he coughed. He took a sip of water and then answered, “I don’t know.”

“Oh. Well you should consider it. It’s a beautiful country with a great economy and plenty of beautiful young women for you liki—”

“Mom,” Amaya squeaked and slammed her palms on the table. “Please stop. You’re making everyone at this table uncomfortable.”

“Oh, honey, I’m just making conversation. I’m sure George doesn’t—”

“Mom!” Her fingers gripped the veil on the table. “*They’re dating.*”

George winced.

Martha’s lips opened into the shape of an ‘o,’ and her eyebrows creased like she was struggling to understand. “Who?”

“Dream and George. They’re dating,” Amara stated.

George’s eyes took interest upon the fake fruit decoration in the middle of the table.

“Please stop asking weird questions,” she finished.

It took a second for Martha to regain her composure and utter a small and guilty, “Oh.”

George didn’t think he could ever feel more relief at such an unexpected confession, and the tension on his neck began to unravel.

It was awkward for the few minutes of silence that followed, but it felt better than having to answer a dozen intruding questions that made it much harder to keep his powers at bay.

“Well you two make an adorable couple,” Martha finally said with a strained tone. She stabbed her potato with her fork and took a half-aggressive bite.

George beat his fingers on the wooden table to the rhythm of his heartbeat. Sapnap coughed to get his attention. He pressed his lips tight like he was trying to keep himself from smiling and raised both eyebrows. George restrained himself from catapulting his potato to slap the teasing look off his face.

With the awkwardness filling the room, Amara excused herself to the bathroom and disappeared down the hallway.

“How did you two meet?” Martha asked.

“Um,” Dream started and sent George a look. Then he turned back to Martha whose smile looked painfully awkward. “We’ve been best friends since we were young.”

“Oh.” She narrowed her eyes. “And you just suddenly decided you were good for each other?”

Dream locked eyes with George, and a faded pink drowned his freckles. George couldn’t tell what he was thinking, and he almost wanted to get in his head, but he was too nervous about what he would find (or more precisely, how he would react to whatever it was he did find). Instead, he opted for breaking eye contact and staring at the dry chicken breast on his plate.

“Something like that,” Dream said.

George only recuperated his breath when Martha stopped pestering them and instead went on a tangent about the way she had met her ex-husband. Her words faded into the background while he thought about why Dream had decided to use *that* excuse out of any other he could’ve come up with. He knew he had caught onto the way Martha’s incessant questioning was affecting him, but he never in a million years would have thought he would make up something like *that* to save him.

It wasn’t that he minded. It was more so that it confused him, but he was grateful for it. He didn’t exactly want to find out what Martha would do if she figured out she had invited four EMs into her home after she had made her thoughts about them abundantly clear. Worse, George didn’t want to entertain the thought of how she would react if she figured out he was a Psychic too.

When he looked up from his plate, he noticed Dream was staring at him with furrowed eyebrows and a faint blush. He could feel him nudging at his mind, so he took a deep breath and allowed him to get in his head.

Are you okay?

I'm fine.

I can make an excuse for you if you need to leave.

Let's just finish dinner and we can go.

Dream offered a silent nod and looked back toward Martha with a fake smile as he returned to nodding along to her story.

Amara came back some time later, and after an excruciating hour of hearing Martha talk about her life story, they were done. Before she could rope them into another traumatic experience, Dream told Martha they needed to head back to the mechanic's shop.

"Alright, sweetheart, it was great meeting you. I hope you all enjoyed dinner."

"We did. Again, I appreciate you inviting us. It was very kind of you," Dream said and shook Martha's hand one last time before they made their way out of the house.

"Drive safe, boys. And take care of your boyfriend, Dream, you're a lucky one." Martha waved goodbye and embarrassed them one last time before shutting the door.

George released a prolonged exhale and breathed in the fresh air outside like it was heaven for his lungs.

As soon as they were a safe distance from the house, Skeppy and Sapnap stopped themselves and burst into cackles. Although George had figured it was inevitable, he didn't find it any less annoying.

"Boyfriend, huh, Dream?" Sapnap asked between laughter. "Ain't that sweet?" he imitated Martha's voice.

"That was the most intense second-hand embarrassment I've ever experienced in my life," Skeppy exclaimed.

George rolled his eyes. It didn't surprise him that his friends were laughing at his mortifying experience like it had been a circus act. He doubted they had even noticed how close he had been to losing it. Yet he was relieved it had ended without life-long repercussions besides the memory that would keep him up during the night for the years to come.

Dream sent Sapnap and Skeppy an unimpressed glare. "Let's just hurry up before the old man decides he'll get to keep our truck," he muttered and turned on his heel.

Sapnap and Skeppy spent the entire walk to the mechanic's shop talking about their terribly embarrassing dinner while Dream and George were mostly quiet. Dream stole glances at him every so often, and George could tell he wanted to ask how he was feeling, but he was likely saving the question for when it was just the two of them.

When they arrived, Dream handed the money off to the old man who spent a minute looking at the bills like they were fake and then kicked them out of his shop with a grunt.

They were on the road five minutes after that with Skeppy taking the next drive and Sapnap on shotgun. They stopped for gas once, and when Skeppy got out to pay and Sapnap ran out because he was about to piss himself, Dream and George were consequently left in the car by themselves.

George didn't take his eyes off his book once. The heavy silence between them was more awkward

than upset. If anything, George was glad the sun was out so the warmth on his face was hardly visible in the dim interior of the truck.

Around midnight, they arrived at a tiny run-down motel by the highway. The beat-down building was in the shape of a U, and there were only a couple of cars scattered in the parking lot. There was also a 24-hour gas station beside it and a sketchy diner across the street. It looked like the kind of location that attracted important businessmen having affairs and drug addicts lining up for their next hit. Thus, it was the perfect place to not draw attention to themselves.

There was hardly any sign of life besides the lady at the front desk who ran Dream's illegitimate ID (he claimed to have acquired it from a cousin with 'connections'). Thankfully, the ID went through without a hitch, and she handed off two keys for two doubles next to each other.

When they reached their rooms outside, Sapnap covered his snicker with a cough and said, "Welp, I guess I'll share rooms with Skeppy so we can give the *boyfriends* their privacy. Try not to make too much noise, boys. I'm sure the beds are creaky."

He finished off with a wink, and before Dream could have a chance to attack, Sapnap ran into the room and slammed the door in his face.

George was too exhausted to even attempt to help him, so he deemed it an easy defeat. Meanwhile, laughing, Skeppy unlocked his door once Dream had backed off and bid his farewell for the night.

Their room had two double beds with dingy white sheets and an ugly brown lamp with murky yellow lightning. The whole room gave off the scent of cigarettes and disgusting a 'air freshener.'

George wondered if the place even had cleaning staff after he found a pair of used boxers beside his bed. Wincing, he levitated them to the trash can and started rummaging through the bag he had bought earlier for a shirt to sleep in.

It was after George hopped out of the shower that Dream broke the strained silence between them by blurting out, "I'm sorry."

"What?" George replied with a frown.

"The dinner and, um, saying we were dating," Dream muttered, scratching the back of his head and looking toward the ground. The out-of-character embarrassed smile on his face was adorable.

"Don't worry about it. I know why you did it," George replied with a chuckle and dried his hair with a towel. He turned away to bury himself into the stuffy covers. At the same time, Dream sat on the edge of his bed and faced him.

"I appreciate it," George added.

Dream's faint smile expanded. He glimpsed at his clasped hands and nervously clicked his tongue. He seemed to hesitate with his next words, but he said them anyway.

"For what it's worth, I don't think it's completely out of the realm of possibility."

George choked on his own breath and stuttered out, "What?"

Dream stifled a laugh when he met his gaze again. George wasn't sure if it was amused, awkward, nervous, or all of the above.

Shrugging, Dream said, "As in, we're best friends and we already do everything together. I think if

we *had* to pretend to be a couple, it wouldn't be *that* hard."

"Oh," George said, his throat dry. "Right."

There was a pregnant pause; then, Dream got comfortable on his bed, and with one last look, he smiled and said, "Night," before turning off the lamp on the stand between them. He shuffled to face the other way so George couldn't see him.

"Goodnight," George whispered.

Although sleep came surprisingly easy after that, his nightmares were ruthless, and he found himself wishing he hadn't fallen asleep even though his body was exhausted.

He was trapped in the same black pit as before. He was on the ground with his ankles and wrists tied down by the same black, monstrous tendrils. His mouth was gagged, and he couldn't have screamed for help if he tried. The merciless shadow snaked over his shoulders and its murmurs left a trace of chills around his neck.

But this time, he understood them.

"*George...*" the shadowy, dull whisper called out. Its voice was so familiar—so cold and cruel, but George couldn't tell who it belonged to. "*Wake up, George.*"

George squirmed and tried to spit out the mound wedged in his throat. Desperate tears pooled at the corners of his eyes and he struggled against the ropes that left his skin raw from how bad they scratched. But no matter how hard he tried, they only felt like they were getting tighter.

"*You don't have to be afraid, anymore, George,*" the voice whispered, its tone growing deeper and raspier, reverberating across his skin like thousands of scraping nails against metal. "*I'll always be here to protect you.*"

"*George...*"

He closed his eyes. The shadow's presence grew stronger all around him. Its chilling ghost arms embraced his torso and chest like it was phasing into him—desperate for his attention like it was seeking entry... or like it was trying to yank itself from him.

"*Let me out.*"

George shook his head and desperately tried to block it out.

"*Wake up,*" it said in his head, loud and hollow.

He jolted awake.

His breathing was jagged and the lasting trace of two hands smothering his neck dissipated into the air. The glow of the full moon snuck through the only window in the room. When he touched his face, he felt it cold enough that it could pass off as a corpse.

As he sat up, he clutched the sheets and searched the room in a frantic. His pillow was drenched and there was cold sweat dripping from his hair onto his forehead. The chilling temperature numbed his skin. The clock next to the TV read 2:19 AM.

"George?" Dream's warm whisper spilled like honey beside him.

George spun to look at him with a hitch of his breath.

His face was barely discernable with the flash of white outlining his silhouette from behind.

“What happened? Are you okay?” he asked in a rush. The aura of concern he emanated felt like a heater in the mid of a lonesome winter.

“I—” George swallowed. A tear rolled down his cheek. “It was just a nightmare.”

Dream sat up and reached his bare arm to turn on the lamp between them. The yellow light painted his pretty face and gold eyes that were still half-sleep and glazed over with confusion. He inclined his body toward George and only then did he notice he had shed his shirt off somewhere during the night.

“I’ll be fine,” George managed and took his eyes off Dream to lie back down. He stared at the blank ceiling with his throat feeling scraped and aching. His lips were trembling, and he could still feel a chilling invisible arm clutching him and hear the whispers resonating inside his mind despite the room being dead silent.

It’s all in your head, he told himself.

Next to him, he heard Dream shuffle out of his bed. From the corner of his eye, he could see him towering over him. He sent him a faint smile that made George’s heart beat a little faster. He wondered if Dream could hear it.

“Scoot over.”

“Huh?” George stifled in confusion.

“Scoot over. I’ll sleep with you tonight.”

George gaped at him for a moment before shifting to the other end of the bed. The bed dipped beside him and he felt Dream’s body radiating heat settle near. Dream dug himself inside the covers and faced him.

Wistful memories of their old sleepovers crossed his mind. They were his favorite recollections of falling asleep in his bed with Dream after he had snuck in through his window. He would awaken in the middle of the night sometimes to see Dream’s peaceful aspect in the light of the moon pouring through half-open curtains. Those were the memories that comforted him the most—encompassed with a kind of fullness he so desperately craved and treasured from his best friend.

He fluttered his eyes shut, but he couldn’t help the tremor off his hands. With lips pursed tight, his memory burned with the menacing presence of his nightmares that robbed him of all pleasant thoughts.

Dream scooted closer, and his breathy whisper grazed his cheeks with warmth. “Turn around.”

George didn’t have the energy to question it, so he did as told. The feeling of Dream’s arm wrapping around his torso under the covers ignited his skin, and the fervent heat of his bare body blanketed him like a shield amid an arctic snow.

Dream pulled him closer—so close he could feel the dampness of his breath tingling against the back of his neck and the softness of his lips grazing his skin every time he breathed out. His scent blended around them like a fragrance, and it eased George like nothing else had.

A longing fondness emanated from Dream and pooled around them in a bubble of protection like an unbreakable force field where nothing could ever hurt him. The smile that spread on George’s

face was inevitable.

George's heartbeat slowed to the rhythm of Dream's exhalations, and Dream's hum of approval suggested he could hear it too. Dream's rapid heartbeat pounded against his back like a gentle massage. George relaxed the weight of his body into Dream's hold like they were two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle finding their one and only.

His eyelids were heavy and his limbs were as light as feathers. He felt himself floating into a pleasant white slumber, the shadow that had been stalking him for the past days long forgotten now. Only Dream's pleasant aura beamed in his dreams that night like a comforting hearth full of delightful memories and an overwhelming blanket of safety.

It was home.

Chapter End Notes

A tentative update schedule for every chapter of the story left (plus a little surprise spin-off) and the chapter titles are posted on both my tumblr and twitter (pinned posts) if you want to check that out. I post a lot about Aether's Legacy on both, so you can follow me if you're into that! Also I recently made a post about looking to commission a few artists for art about this story (not everyone but a few), so DM me if you're interested in that! That started off this way and I absolutely love their art, so I'm looking for a few more artist hands :D

We're back to our weekly update schedule from now on, this time it's going to be **an update every Friday**. I only have a few chapters left to write in all and oh my god has it been driving me crazy excited, not sure how I've been able to contain myself from just posting everything I have but wow! I mentioned this on my twitter but there's a **huge easter egg in one of the posted chapters** that (as far as I know) only Grav has caught onto about a major plot point that's coming. If you find it, **don't say what it is**, just write in the comments that you think you found it so I know aha ;)

Anyhow, I love y'all! So excited to be back! Let me know what you think, your comments literally bring me life! I'll see y'all next week <3

Con amor,
Light

P.S: Never explicitly stated this but please don't be discouraged from offering constructive criticism down in the comments. I take all the help I can get so if you don't like something or have a suggestion on something, just let me know! I promise you won't hurt my feelings, I'm a physically smol, mentally big girl. You can also send me an ask on tumblr if you want to stay anonymous. And again, I reply to all my comments :)

[tumblr](#) & [twitter](#)

Disaster in Tennessee

Chapter Notes

The fact this story is the brightest part of my life right now in between trying to survive my math major, keeping up with my STEM teaching courses, working on my Creative Writing minor, handling volunteering responsibilities, and having a crisis because I think I've been dealing with undiagnosed ADHD without realizing .-.

Anyway, if you're not following Grav on social media ([twitter](#) and [tumblr](#)), what are you even doing? They're like the luckiest one here getting to read everything three chapters in advance, love you Grav, thanks for being the best beta around <3

This chapter is where the real juice starts so... :))

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Waking to the scent of pine and two strong arms embracing him like a giant teddy bear would have been the perfect morning for George had it not been for the deafening snores of the giant spooning him. Even then he couldn't help but smile at the warmth of Dream's body encasing him.

When he opened his eyes, he raised a hand to shield his vision from the sunlight coming through the window. The clock by the TV read 8:02 AM, and considering they had arranged to meet up at 8:15 to set off, George decided it was about time they got out of bed.

He attempted to unlatch Dream's arms around him, but his friend's grip proved to be as strong asleep as it was awake. Dream nuzzled further into the crook of George's neck and released a drawn-out sigh.

"Dream," he groaned and wiggled around to poke his cheek. "We have to get up."

"Five more minutes, mom..." he grumbled and tightened hold.

The warmth of, what George now realized was bare skin, made his face burn. Although it was unlikely that Sapnap and Skeppy would burst in on them in such an intimate position seeing as the door was locked, the wide-open curtains didn't evade the possibility that they would catch a glimpse.

Thus, George used all his strength to pry Dream's arms away, figuring that if they didn't get up now, Sapnap and Skeppy would be teasing him about it for the rest of their time.

"Dream. We really need to take off. Sapnap and Skeppy are going to be waiting for us."

"Mhm," Dream replied yet didn't make an effort to move.

George took a breath, leaned closer to his face, and shouted, "DREAM!"

Dream pulled away to cover his ears. "Okay, okay!" he grumbled, his tone drowsed with sleep. "Jeez, you don't have to scream. My ears are sensitive."

George scoffed and shoved him aside to slip out of the covers. "Clearly not because you didn't

answer the first two times I asked.”

As he did, Dream sat up and scrubbed the sleep from his eyes. He raised his arms to stretch, and George spun around to avoid the sight of his currently shirtless best friend.

The second he got on his feet, as if on cue, someone slammed the door and startled them. George sprung away from the bed to rush for the entrance just as Sapnap took a peek through the window. Fortunately, it was fast enough that Sapnap wouldn't have noticed what bed he got up from. When he started making out with the glass, leaving disgusting slobber behind, George flipped him off and opened the door.

“Rise and shine!” Sapnap announced and stepped into the room with a much-too cheerful smile.

“Surprised Dream isn't the one waking us up,” Skeppy said.

Sapnap cracked up and greeted George with that ugly smirk of his. Then he wiggled his eyebrows and said, “The lovebirds were probably up too late having a little *too much* fun. Y'all must be *really* sore and tired.”

George struggled to keep his face a normal shade as he reached to smack him, but Sapnap pulled out a fire fist and warned him to stay back before he could.

Dream came up behind George (surprisingly already dressed) and saved him from any further embarrassment by deflecting the topic.

“Bold of you to tease the one who's paying for all your meals.”

Sapnap huffed and extinguished the fire enveloping his fist. “Whatever. Let's just hurry up, I'm starving,” he exclaimed while they began to gather their stuff.

They didn't talk about it.

Not while sharing the back seat while Sapnap took the wheel and Skeppy took shotgun. Not while George stared at the same paragraph of his book for five minutes because Dream's presence was too distracting beside him. Not when they stopped for gas and were left alone in the truck yet again. And certainly not when they stopped at a small diner a few hours from the Tennessee border for breakfast.

It was an old-fashioned 20th-century diner that, paired with an antique jukebox, was dazzled with the plentiful portraits of legendary 20th and 21st-century bands and artists. It was surprisingly busy with lively waitresses and waiters serving families and couples scattered across the polished wooden tables and striped booths with large windows facing the parking lot. The hostess greeted them with too bright of a beam and cheerfully asked them how many people they would be serving. Then she led them to a booth off the back by the jukebox that was playing an upbeat classic.

George and Dream wordlessly sat beside each other, close enough that their arms brushed against each other every time one of them shifted. Sapnap quirked a suggestive eyebrow at the action that George preferred to ignore.

A waitress took their orders soon after, and Sapnap took full advantage of Dream's wallet to buy himself a hefty order of pancakes with a platter of eggs, sausage, and toast. Skeppy seemed a bit more distracted than usual staring out the window and tapping his fingers on the table. Dream had

to call his name twice before he realized the waitress was waiting on him.

After she took his and Dream's orders, the waitress excused herself and left the boys in silence to listen to the jukebox music, the racking dishes from the kitchen, and the energetic voices from the tables surrounding them.

A stressed-out couple sitting by the front door with young triplets blabbering and toying with their food. An old woman using her baby voice on a toddler as she cut his pancakes into little pieces. A muscular woman with a tattoo sleeve giggling as she wrapped her arm around a woman's shoulder and nuzzled her cheek. A lonesome teenage girl two booths behind them who was nervously scanning the crowd with her fists tightly wound into rocks.

The air around her stung with an aura of anxiety that was slowly encompassing the room. George looked away before her aura could hijack his emotions, yet even with the distance, an inevitable swirling in his gut stole his appetite. He looked down at his hands and started playing with his fingers while attempting to put his mind elsewhere.

Dream leaned into him, and when their hands grazed, the tenderness in his aura caressed him like a milder version of his morning bear hug. He closed his eyes and pretended they were still in bed, if only for one second.

When he opened them and met Dream's gaze, he smiled. Across the table, Sapnap narrowed his eyes and alternated glances between them with suspicion.

He opened his mouth to undoubtedly say something that would have George launching his drink at him but before he could, Dream slid his tablet with a map of their location in front of them.

"We're stopping by the shopping mall at the border and then heading to another hotel for the night before staying in Nashville for the day to unwind a little."

"Unwind?" Skeppy snapped, taking a sudden, not-so-pleased interest in the conversation. George winced at the hostility behind his tone, and he was suddenly aware of the uneasy aura caving in on them. "You want us to *unwind*? While Bad is out there in danger?"

Taken aback by his voice, Dream's look hardened and he replied, "I didn't mean it that way. We've been on the run for a few days now. We'll be needing a break so we don't lose our minds soon."

Skeppy glimpsed at George before looking back at Dream with a tense expression. The rush of emotions was too much, and George turned away to steer his focus onto something else. "You mean *we* need a break or *George* does?"

Bewildered, Dream said, "Look, Skeppy, I know you're worried for Bad. We all are, but—"

"And you think taking a break is going to help him?"

"Are you okay? I don't understand where this is coming from. We've all been trying our best here."

Maybe your best isn't enough, the thought invaded George's mind along with the growing wave of anxiety. Something was wrong, and it wasn't just with Skeppy.

"Can we please stop fighting and eat breakfast in silence?" Sapnap said, his voice wavering and missing its twinkle of confidence.

They fell into silence at Sapnap's intervention. George wasn't sure how the conversation had escalated so quickly, but the tension weighing down the table was impossible to ignore. George couldn't have said anything even if he tried.

Skeppy huffed and turned away to glare at the family walking outside in the parking lot. Dream looked onto the table with an expression shrouded in uncertainty and guilt. Sapnap shook his head in disapproval and looked like he was trying hard to hold something back. There was something off about the ambient surrounding them.

As he turned back to people-watch, George increasingly noticed the shifting mood across the room. The couple with the triplets were scolding their crying kids. The two women by the door had separated and looked like they were arguing. The couple with greying hair was doing everything to avoid looking at each other.

When he looked back at the girl, he could hardly cope with the level of agitation she was radiating. Her emotions rushed the room like blowing winds from a tropical storm creeping over them. Her sleeves were covering her face and she was gripping the hair at the top of her head.

George gripped his pendant and slowed his breathing as a sense of impending trouble swamped him and made every muscle in his body tense.

How was she doing this?

The bell at the entrance dinged. Two police officers strolled inside. One of them began to talk to the hostess while the other surveyed the scene.

George's grip on his necklace tightened. He turned away. From the corner of his eye, he watched as they took a seat at the bar and started conversing.

It's fine. There's just here to eat. Keep calm and you'll be fine, he told himself. But the static in his head was growing louder.

A strange sensation hijacked the air—it was one he did not recognize but that he knew he had felt before. It was like an unknown presence had dipped his head in the water. The closest he could compare it to was the time he had been caught in one of his classmate's feedback loops during a group evaluation—his emotions had fallen so strong on George that he had projected them back, feeding into an intensifying and endless loop. What he felt now was powerful, and it ached for disorder.

It was undoubtedly a Psychic.

It happened too quickly.

A passing waitress tripped on an invisible force and her tray went flying. A cacophony of plates and cups shattering broke the lasting trace of the happy aura in the air. The room fell silent.

He kept his breathing steady, but his heart was beating faster. As he met Dream's eyes, George shook his head with confusion in response to his questioning gaze, and he searched the room in a frenzy for the source of power.

Then it hit him. A truckload of fear, remorse, and chaos struck him so hard that he had to clutch the table.

"What's wrong?" Dream asked.

George's eyes landed on the girl—the one who was now glancing around in a panic as people started getting up to help the waitress clean up the mess.

“She's an empath,” was all he managed while he tried to counter the intensity of her emotions. Getting stuck in a feedback loop with so many people around would only result in disaster.

Dream cursed under his breath. They flinched when the plates around the room began to shatter. Everyone was looking around wondering what the hell was going on.

The girl's emotions were growing more frantic. More glasses shattered. The items on her table began to levitate.

The man next to her jerked from his chair and raised a trembling finger at her. “It's her!”

The girl turned to the crowd in shock. Her mouth opened and closed like she was trying to come up with an explanation. An incomprehensible blabber escaped her.

“Call the cops,” someone shouted. The two officers at the entrance turned toward the commotion.

Dream tried to jump to his feet to help, but George had enough sense to pull him back before he could run out of the booth. He directed George a glare and said, “She's scared.”

But George only gripped his arm tighter, and he stared up at Dream with unusual darkness to his gaze. Every part of him was shouting for them not to get involved. Dream pried his hand off his arm and tried to get up again, but George used his telekinesis to hold him back.

“Let. Me. Go,” Dream said through his teeth, his voice now threatening and grim—a tone that wasn't unfamiliar to George but that Dream had never used on him.

Then Skeppy explained exactly what was going through George's mind. “If we help, they'll be onto us too.”

Dream's glare bore an inferno. He looked toward Sapnap for backup, but he seemed conflicted. Hesitantly, Sapnap forced himself to speak. “You're the one who said we can't cause a scene. We're already on the news, Dream.”

The girl leaped from her seat and scrambled toward the exit when the officers rushed toward her.

“Freeze,” one called out.

The first officer was hit by a flying chair that pinned him against a table and made him release a pained groan. The second managed to tackle the girl and hold her wrists behind her back while he unhooked his handcuffs from his belt. More plates and glasses crashed around them. People rushed out of the restaurant. Others took cover to block the flying pieces of glass. The officer holding the girl down shielded his face when a plate crashed against his back.

Dream struggled against his hold. George's head felt like it was about to implode from the energy he was expending. But he held tighter.

“We can't, Dream.” His voice was strained and barely audible. It made Dream stop struggling for a second, enough that George managed to break through their mind block to calm him down.

The first officer joined his partner in holding the girl down. He opened a pouch on his belt and retrieved an item that made his blood run cold. The ruckus came to a halt when the man injected her with the tranquilizer. Every item flying came crashing down. The empathetic force that had

been straining on his mind vanished into nothingness and left the drowsy and chilling trace of an aura now gone.

His heart crawled up his esophagus when he saw the officers drag the unconscious girl away. A fire burned his throat as the crowd broke into claps and cheers. It left an ugly mark in his mind that invited his shadow pursuer to settle around his shoulders and murmur unpleasant thoughts that left him guilt-ridden and ashamed.

It didn't help that the pure unbridled rage filtering out of Dream erupted in his stomach as soon as the door shut, and it made him recoil. He rushed to break the empathic link between them and restore their mind block, though Dream's anger was so overwhelming it still left his heart racing and his body unpleasantly hot.

They rushed to pay without finishing their meal. George avoided looking at the police officers standing by their cars waiting for backup outside. His fingertips sizzled with a residue of energy and an unfamiliar morbid craving that chilled his spine. He tried to dismiss the image of the officer's snapped necks and sprawled-out bodies on the concrete that his mind conjured.

The car ride was eerily silent.

The only sound was of the quiet radio playing a popular pop song and the tired rash of the wheels on the road. Skeppy was focused on driving. Sapnap was on shotgun with his gaze fixed on the buildings as they passed. Dream was glaring at the seat in front of him, his knuckles so tight they were white. His emotions were bitter and clear, and he didn't bother to hide them from George.

It was hard to breathe with the suffocating resentment taking to the air. George lowered his window to let the fresh air in, but it didn't do much to calm him down.

After a few hours of trying to read his book, they stopped at a small shopping district to buy supplies. The afternoon sky was ashen and overcast, making it apparent that another storm was approaching.

Everything seemed to be going according to plan, even if Dream hadn't spoken a word since the diner, Sapnap had barely offered a hum in response to Skeppy's questions, and Skeppy was growing more frustrated by the minute.

The thrift store was dull and silent. It smelled like the inside of a damp attic and the dust particles in the air made him turn up his nose when they walked inside. The place was disordered and cluttered with shirts sprawled under the racks and food wrappers littered over the shelves.

Save for the shopkeeper sitting at the cashier with his legs propped on the counter watching TV and slurping noodles from an instant ramen cup, there was only one other lady swiping the racks at the women's section while her daughter sat near playing pretend with her stuffed animals. The little girl smiled wide and showed off her missing front tooth when George walked by. He returned the gesture with a much less cheerful expression and followed his friends to the men's section.

If the guilt of what had gone down at the diner wasn't already weighing him down enough, Dream's anger was still heavy and obvious. It was starting to get on George's nerves—the way his best friend was avoiding sparing him so much as a glance.

He watched Dream for the majority of the time as he shopped and waited to see if he would acknowledge him, but he never did. George desperately wanted to say something, whether it be screaming at him for refusing to understand why he had done what he did or profusely apologizing for preventing him from helping.

George just wanted to talk. But the words refused to come out. He wanted Dream to say something first, to apologize first, to tell George he understood him and validate his reasons for refusing to help the poor girl. But he knew it wouldn't happen. George was too stubborn and Dream was too angry to apologize.

It was terribly ironic, really. Just a few hours ago, they had been at what appeared to be the highest point of their friendship, embraced in bed on a beautiful morning. Now, the unspoken stress weighed so heavy on him that he wanted nothing but to distance himself.

Eventually, Skeppy and Sapnap disappeared somewhere into the other side of the store, leaving him alone with Dream. George had a sneaking suspicion it was intentional. The silence grew too much for him, and he just wanted Dream to say something, anything. Perhaps that's why he chose to say what he said.

"It had to happen."

Dream tensed.

The sound of the hangers striking each other as he scrolled through the rack halted. A messed-up part of George couldn't help but take a bit of enjoyment out of the way he triggered Dream with a single phrase. The other side of him wondered if this vile aspect of George was coming to light due to the stress of their trip or if it had always been buried under layers of insecurity.

Dream faced him with an intimidating glare that could rival Medusa herself.

"What did, George?" He spat his name like it was venom in his mouth. It made George wince, but instead of feeling guilty, Dream's anger invigorated a sadistic side of him like it was fueling a fire. "Letting an innocent girl be tranquilized and not doing anything to save her?"

"We had no choice."

"That's bullshit and you know it."

The shout caught the attention of the mother and daughter. Taking the girl into her arms, the woman hurried toward the exit. George felt a little guilty, but it was overridden by a surge of animosity. His eyes found Dream's again—a blazing stare that bore through him like a laser.

"You said we'd do everything to save Bad."

"This doesn't have anything to do with Bad," Dream growled, stomping closer, so close George could feel his ragged breathing on his face. "You let a poor girl be taken to who knows where—a facility for all you know—what you've been afraid of since you got to AGE."

Anger wasn't the only emotion present in his gaze. There was hurt. Betrayal. Disappointment. The emotions pierced his chest and made it hard to breathe, only riling him up further. "We did nothing when we could've done something."

"Of course I know that," George yelled back, his arms doing circles over his head and ending up scratching through his hair as he paced back and forth. His voice was on the verge of angry tears.

"I've lived with that fear since I discovered I was a fucking Psychic, but right now," he emphasized his words by pointing his finger at the ground. Their gazes were locked on each other. "*Right now*, our priority is not getting caught and being arrested because if we do, who knows what's going to happen to Bad?"

The tears threatened to spill. Fury outpoured from his chest and encompassed both. Something inside his mind prodded, asking to come out. George almost considered releasing it. His voice cracked. “What’s going to happen to us, Dream?”

“Yeah?” Dream remarked in spite, his movements jagged and tense, and he closed the gap between them again. His next words were a murmur spat with pure rage and without regret.

“Because of you, that girl’s *never* going to have a chance to even live a normal life.”

George couldn’t speak. His words were caught on his throat, and he could hardly breathe from the shame and anger merging together hot and ready to blow through him.

It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair at all—blaming him when Dream knew. He *knew* that as soon as they intervened, they would be taken in along with the girl and both her and George would end up fucked. Him more than her. George had no chance to escape from a situation like that. Especially not after the bullshit they had pulled back in Florida.

“Is that really what you mean, Dream?” he said, words barely audible and full of nothing but malice. Inside, the presence was beating his head aching to be let loose and take control of the situation.

“Or are you afraid to admit that if you wanted to, you could’ve stepped in. You know you’re strong enough to break through my telekinesis.” He forced a finger against Dream’s chest, and their eyes fixated on each other with nothing but pure fury.

“But you acted like a coward too.”

In less than a second, Dream had him pinned against one of the clothing racks, his fists bunched around the fabric of his shirt and raising him to his tip-toes. Every one of his limbs was urging him to fight back. But George kept a straight expression, the same darkness from before clouding his eyes. In his head, he could hear the shadow whispering its forlorn curses—telling him he could take Dream, demanding he let it out.

He almost did. Until Sapnap rushed toward them to push them away from each other and stood in between with his arms extended, infuriated. The silence was heavy on his ears. All he wanted to do was scream and tear it apart.

“The hell is going on with you guys.” It wasn’t a question. Sapnap exhaled. He pressed a finger to the bridge of his nose and glared at both. “Get back to the car. We’re not doing this here.”

Sapnap waited until Dream started walking to follow, eyeing George to make sure he came along too.

Skeppy quietly joined them a few minutes later with a shopping bag, and Sapnap took the front seat, leaving Dream and George in the back to avoid each other. It was suffocating.

They drove in absolute silence, the radio having lost the station it was playing hours into the empty, middle-of-nowhere road. George’s fingers gripped his book as he struggled to even get past the first sentence. The top of his page ripped when he turned it. His jaw tightened, his own rage and that of Dream’s settling in his gut. However, as time passed, his anger dissipated, and it was replaced by growing remorse that he refused to think about.

It rained the rest of the way.

The second motel they stopped at for the week looked even more decrepit than the first—a tiny c-

shaped bundle of barely a dozen rooms. The worker behind the counter looked about done with his job, and when Skeppy asked for two rooms, he responded to him with a blank stare and a quiet grumble.

“Only got one room.”

“But there weren’t that many cars in the parking lot,” Sapnap said.

The guy with long black bangs and huge purple bags under his eyes glared, just as crude and unamused as before. “One room.”

George sent Dream a side-glance when he didn’t even bother intervening and instead leaned against the wall behind them to grimly stare at the guy with his arms crossed. Skeppy looked about done with everything, so he simply threw him the money, snatched the key he had placed on the desk, and stormed toward the designated number.

Like the last motel, there were two beds and a sofa. The television looked to be from a hundred years ago, beat down with age and accompanied by a remote half-wrapped in duct tape to keep it from falling apart. The white walls were starting to yellow, and when George turned on the only lamp in the room, he had to twist the bulb a few times to get it to stop flickering.

“I’ll take one of the beds with Skeppy,” Sapnap muttered as they looked in between each other.

George looked toward Dream who didn’t even think before saying, “I’ll sleep on the couch.”

It stung. Especially after the night they had spent together. George couldn’t help the twisted fear settling in his stomach when he remembered the nightmares that were no doubt getting ready to strike amid the darkness.

Dream took the first shower without question and George found himself breathing a little easier. Unfortunately, both Skeppy and Sapnap seemed to be in a similar emotional haze. Skeppy was off in his own world as he searched through the late-night channels. His aura was stagnant, but he could sense a distant shame he was clearly holding back both from himself and George.

Sapnap’s aura was unusually dull and kept to himself. At one point, George tried to walk over to apologize, but Sapnap turned away before he could get any closer, so George decided to give him space instead. He hated that Sapnap had been caught in the crossfire of his argument with Dream, especially because George knew his loyalty to the both of them was unyielding. He had never wanted to put Sapnap in a place where he had to choose between them, and despite their argument, he doubted Dream did either.

When it was his turn to take the last shower, he hurried in and at last gained a moment completely to himself with his own emotions. The cold, dingy water drops hitting his skin gave him enough external feeling to drown out the static in his head. The lights were off when he got out and his friends were already tucked in bed. He headed for his own bed quietly, only glimpsing at Dream who was facing the couch cushions.

He buried himself in the sheets and closed his eyes, and it wasn’t long before the now familiar and unpleasant coldness cloaked his neck and shoulders, sending goosebumps all throughout his body.

In the back of his head, he could hear the same hushed, shadowy whispers as he continuously drifted into a stage between sleep from how exhausted his body felt and awakened as every time the murmurs grew louder, it stirred him back to consciousness.

In the middle of the night, he heard someone shuffle and get out of bed, and when he opened his

eyes, he noticed the spot on the bed next to Skeppy was empty and the door was closing quietly. He pushed the sheets aside and got up to investigate.

Outside, Sapnap was lying on the back of their truck facing the sky. The post-storm air was humid and dingy, and it made the world feel like it was at a standstill.

George approached and shivered at the chilly night. He buried his hands into the pocket of his red hoodie, and he stood by the truck for a while, wondering if Sapnap was ignoring him or if he simply hadn't noticed his presence. Sapnap was stuck in a daze—his eyes fixated on the sky and his mouth settled into a slight frown. Both his hands were comfortably placed above his stomach, and he remained unmoving.

George would've thought he was asleep had it not been for his open eyes and his awakened emotions staining the air—a spurt of concern twisted with quiet alarm. Sapnap kept still as George settled himself next to him, shifting his gaze toward the galaxy above: millions of stars, all shapes and sizes scattered into an explosion of beauty.

“The sky looks nice,” he said.

Sapnap nodded.

George swallowed, putting his hands over his chest and mindlessly fidgeting with his pendant. He tried not to let Sapnap's emotions swarm him.

“Are you okay?” he asked a few minutes into their quiet stargazing.

“I don't know. You tell me,” he replied.

George shifted uncomfortably. He closed his eyes and pursed his lips as he prepared for the unavoidable subject.

“You're angry.”

“Damn right I am,” Sapnap said almost instantly. “I don't understand why you guys are acting this way—making this all about y'all.”

Without having much of an explanation to offer, George replied, “We're not trying to—”

Sapnap interrupted him with a tired groan, rubbing his eyes frustratedly and sitting up. Finding it awkward to continue lying, George followed his lead and let his hands fall on his lap.

“I know you're not, but it doesn't change the fact that you are. Bad's in trouble and you're here fighting and I—” His brow scrunched up in aggravation and pent-up rage as he searched for his words. Exhaling and glancing down at his lap, his expression relaxed into a disappointed look. “It's not going to help us. All this fighting. Between Dream and Skeppy. Between you and Dream. Everything.”

There was something deeper behind his emotions. George pricked at it, attempting to uncover and analyze it. However, to no avail and exhausted by the strain of his powers in a single day, he asked, “Are you sure it's just that?”

Sapnap pulled his knees to his chest and hugged them. His eyes rose to the stars again. A gentle light kindled in his dark pupils as they reflected the light above. Hesitantly, he admitted, “I was afraid of going on this trip.”

When he paused, George almost poked fun at him on instinct, but he bit his tongue to keep himself from opening his mouth at an inappropriate time.

“But then I thought, hey, maybe this will bring us closer together, y’know? Save Bad, go on a road trip, have a little fun on the way there to keep our mind off things. And now—”

The words felt like needles prickling at his throat. George knew exactly what he meant. Sapnap’s tongue got stuck at the roof of his mouth, his sentence fizzling away, so George finished for him. “It’s turning out to be a mess.”

The forlorn whistling wind took to the night and so did the chorus of cricket chirps and nocturnal insects. George hugged his arms, rubbing his sides to seek warmth, but nothing appeared to help the frigid sensation encompassing him from the inside. He found himself thinking about Dream’s tight embrace, but he pushed the thought away.

“I’m scared,” Sapnap said, words fragile and hushed, so much it felt like they would shatter with one breath. “That it’s going to tear us apart.”

It reminded him of that night all those years ago when he and Sapnap had first connected. Before then, they had treated each other like fighting goats. They still did, but it was no longer out of spite. Sapnap and Dream had fallen into a good rhythm in their friendship fairly easily, partly because Dream was so kind and charming with everyone he met and partly because they just clicked.

On the other hand, Sapnap and George had struggled a fair bit, their interactions often ending in jealous spouts, especially when it came to spending time with Dream. Sapnap had gotten attached to Dream very quickly, and seeing as Dream was George’s only friend back then, it resulted in a messed-up game of tug of war that left the trio at awkward ends.

And then, when George was eleven, Dream had decided on his own terms to take some time to himself. He told them to fix their friendship because he wasn’t going to do it for them. So they had been forced to talk—for real that time. Though even after they had reached an agreement to at least respect each other because they both cared so much for Dream, they always kept each other at arm’s length and there was barely any depth to their interactions.

It wasn’t until that night that everything changed. That they really started calling each other friends.

George shuffled closer to Sapnap, inhaling lightly before awkwardly resting his head on his shoulder. Sapnap didn’t move and instead relaxed his body into the unexpected contact. George wasn’t a touchy person, but he knew Sapnap was more similar to Dream in that aspect, often seeking hugs and kisses to the cheek (that he always paired with a “no homo” after).

Sapnap’s breath ruffled George’s hair when he let out a heavy sigh. “You guys are my family.”

“Nothing’s going to tear us apart,” George whispered.

“You don’t know that.”

George frowned, looking up and noticing the small tear trailing its way down his cheek. Sapnap wiped it off, fluttering his eyes shut a few times and then forcing a smile.

“It tore my family apart.”

The night wind picking up enveloped George’s neck, and the pressure from Sapnap’s hurt settled inside his chest. It was shocking, to say the least, hearing Sapnap even mention his family.

Although George knew Dream's family (not personally but he had at least seen them on the island), he had never once seen Sapnap's, not even a clear picture. He wasn't even aware of any siblings, if there were any.

Similar to Dream, Sapnap had always been an expressive, heart-on-the-sleeve sort of guy. Yet, despite it, he rarely spoke about his family life, even after almost a decade of knowing him. The only vague hints he had gotten about his negative relationship with his parents were the rare shouting his headphones caught every so often when they played Minebuild during the breaks and Sapnap went off the keyboard to do something.

"We used to be so close." He glanced down at his hands and gripped an invisible object, distant eyes glazed into a painful memory. George had to physically pull away, ground himself in his own emotions, and exhale deeply to release Sapnap's heavy emotions.

He opened his palm to reveal a flame the size of a matchstick. It reflected in his eyes like two tiny orbs of heat. They flickered off when the muggy wind picked up and extinguished the flame. "Then the day my powers showed up, I almost accidentally burned the house down and..."

He snickered, but it was full of anguish and without a trace of amusement, the kind of desperate laugh that comes out after you realize you're too tired to hide it—revealing years-worth of repressed pain constantly aching at your throat, settling in the back of your head and pricking you every time things start to go wrong.

It's the kind you swallow and hold back and then tell yourself everything is fine. George knew his laugh. He knew it too well.

And it was only then that he realized the true extent of Sapnap's act—what he had been hiding in plain sight and George had failed to notice, even though now, sitting in front of him, it was unmistakable. It made him feel like he had failed his best friend.

"They fought every day on whether they should put me in repression therapy or send me away. Every fucking day." More tears rolled down his cheeks. His eyebrows scrunched with frustration and regret, and he appeared lost staring light years away. "I was always the one to tell my sisters everything was fine when they asked, and when my parents realized it was tearing the family apart, they made their decision."

"They sent you to AGE..." George finished for him when he couldn't. He turned away when Sapnap's aura grew too painful for him not to drown in. It wasn't until this moment that he understood. That he remembered.

He placed a hand at his shoulder. "It's not going to tear us apart, Sapnap," George said, an unfamiliar assurance seeped in his tone.

"You can't know that."

"I don't, but our bond is too strong to be broken. Not after everything we've gone through. What we will go through."

"If you and Dream keep doing this—" Sapnap pursed his chapped lips together. "It's going to happen."

Their gazes locked—George's rare confident gaze and Sapnap's unusually vulnerable one, his courage having been drowned out of him. It was the one trait George had always admired and the one that made him Sapnap. There was only one sentence running through his mind, one George

hadn't meant to pry into and catch.

You're going to leave me behind.

George's breath hitched. "We won't. I promise. I'll talk to him."

Sapnap pondered it and after a moment, he said, "Aren't you worried about what's going to happen?"

"Yeah." George's hand reached for his pendant and held it tight as he looked toward the sky. Images of his nightmares came in flashes. "I'm scared I'll hurt you guys."

Sapnap laughed, this one lighter and somewhat amused, and slapped his arm to which George made it a point to whine exaggeratedly. "You might be an *arsehole*—" he mocked his accent, causing George to roll his eyes "—sometimes, but you'd never hurt us."

"How can you be so sure?"

Sapnap shrugged, unmoved by his uncertainty. "Apart from being scrawny and short?"

George elbowed him, sporting the smallest of smiles. "Shut up. You're only like an inch taller than me."

Sapnap snorted. "You love us too much." His crooked smile held that mischief that often annoyed George but also made him smile. "Especially Dream."

George scoffed and turned to face the middle-of-nowhere horizon. A comfortable silence fell upon them.

"You ready to hit the hay?" Sapnap asked.

George hesitated, and he didn't even have time to make up an excuse before Sapnap noticed the tension arise in his body.

"You okay?"

"I'm—" George thought about making up an excuse, but after the conversation that had just taken place, something inside him drove him not to. "I've been having nightmares."

"And..." Sapnap narrowed his eyes and scanned him. "You haven't been sleeping well because of it?"

"Not really, it's just—" George exhaled and faced the ground. "It's weird. I can't really sleep by myself."

Sapnap paused before his mouth curved into a teasing smile and he wrapped his arm around George's shoulders to pull him close. "If you wanted me to cuddle with you, you could've just asked, Georgie."

"You idiot, I don't want to cuddle," George grumbled, though he couldn't contain his escaped laugh.

"Georgie wants to cuddle with me! Georgie wants to cuddle with me!" Sapnap shouted, alerting anyone within a mile radius of their presence and making George's face turn into a tomato.

"Get off me." George managed to push him off with a whine.

Sapnap hopped off the truck and nodded his head toward their room. “Come on. Let’s go to bed. Don’t worry, we can keep the socks on if you want,” he said and paired it with a wink.

Sapnap laughed as George jumped off and chased after him. The moonlight shone a little brighter through the tinted windows when they got back inside, and when George and Sapnap finally tucked themselves in the bed by the window, he managed to suppress the nightmares for at least one more night.

Sleep had never been an issue for George.

As a toddler, his parents had been appalled by his ability to tuck himself into bed and pass out in an instant. George had always been a dreamer. Not only did he daydream awake, drowning himself in fantasy worlds and magical settings, but his dreams at night were vivid and clear—even consisting of memories from his past sometimes, memories of those he was closest to. He could recall every detail of his dreams even after he awoke. It also made his nightmares all the more terrifying, waking in a cold sweat and breathing heavily, the remnants of his monstrous pursuers remaining even as he reached for reality.

But tonight, his nightmares weren’t the ones keeping him awake, so late it seemed the sun was on the verge of peeking over the horizon.

It had been two weeks since Dream had told George and Sapnap off. Two weeks since they had talked. He had known Sapnap for almost a year, yet it hadn’t been until now that they had really openly spoken about their so-called friendship.

And tonight, he had spent all night pondering it. There was no particular reason for it. Their dynamic with Dream had returned to normal, and they were no longer ignoring each other’s existence or arguing around him (dismissing their few non-serious squabbles about stupid things like when Sapnap grabbed a pancake off George’s plate one day during breakfast, launched it at the pretty girl who sat in front of him during his first period, and blamed it on George’s powers).

It was almost foreign—this troubled mindset that had been keeping him up. And in favor of calming his mind (or maybe it was something deeper inside driving him to do it), he decided to go outside for some fresh air.

Perhaps it was how he ended up in the garden at five in the morning in his pajamas and slippers. He found him there. He was sitting on the hidden bench facing the forest that also happened to be a popular spot for couples to sneak away to and hang out (or whatever it is they did; George didn’t want to think about it).

He was sobbing quietly as he stared at his open palms on his lap, a tiny flame illuminating the lines of tears on his cheeks and his glass eyes. He looked so different here without his signature grin and his dumb banter, without that spark of vitality and warmth that he admittedly brought to their trio. It felt like George was meeting him again for the first time, this time only bumping into him outside as opposed to literally crashing with him.

“Sapnap?”

Sapnap jerked up, the flame on his palms dying and shrouding his silhouette in darkness. “What are you doing here?”

George approached with caution. He sat down on the other side of the bench, leaving a meter of

distance in between them. "Taking a walk."

"In the middle of the night?"

"What are you doing here?"

Sapnap didn't answer. Instead, he turned away and hugged himself like he was cold, an odd gesture seeing as fire types tended to be the warmest of the Elementals.

"I thought you were supposed to leave for winter break today," George muttered.

"My parents didn't pick me up this year."

"Why not?"

Sensing he didn't want to elaborate further, George chose to stare toward the woods and attempted to find the right words. Unfortunately, he had never been good at comforting people. That had always been Dream's job.

"I don't go home during winter breaks either," he settled for saying.

"You don't?"

George shook his head and offered him a light smile. "They say it's too dangerous for me to be outside of the island."

"That must suck."

"It does." George sighed and his fingers toyed with his pendant. "Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever get out of here."

Sapnap lowered his gaze, his shoulders rising and falling as he released a couple of quiet snuffles.

"But then I remember it's not all bad. I wouldn't have met Dream or you if I hadn't come here."

It seemed to catch Sapnap off-guard, seeing as he stopped sniffling and he looked his way. The night was too dark for George to properly discern his expression. "Me?"

George nodded slowly. "I know we fight a lot, but you and Dream have always been the nicest to me here. You're my friends."

When Sapnap took too long to answer, George feared he had taken his comment as dishonest. That was until two arms suddenly wrapped around him. Sapnap buried his head into his shoulder and sniffled into it. Surprised, George's body tensed up and he took a second to react, but his arms cautiously settled around his torso.

"My friends back in Texas..." Sapnap finally admitted into his shoulder, turning his head so George could only see his hair. "They left after they found out what I was, even though we always told each other we'd be friends for life."

George smiled into his shoulder, pulling him closer and squeezing his eyes shut, knowing all too well what he meant. "We'll never do that."

"Really?"

"Yeah." George chuckled. "Really."

Chapter End Notes

How are we feeling? Who's right? Dream or George? Did they mess up by not helping the girl? What would've happened had they helped her? How's Sapnap going to push them to talk? What's gonna happen next!? Have you taken a sip of water at all since you started reading? If not, do that right now!

Let me know your thoughts in the comments or @ me on Twitter/Tumblr! Also, y'all feel free to theorize, share headcanons, etc. all you want! I don't mind it and it actually makes me smile so wide :D

Y'all are the brightest part of my day nowadays so thank you for being such an amazing audience!

Go check out and support [this amazing fan art @Oyo-oyo made about Chapter 5](#) on Tumblr, they literally almost had me in tears because it's so thoughtful and beautiful

¡Gracias por todo su apoyo! I wouldn't be able to do this without y'all!

Con un grandísimo abrazo,

Light <3

[tumblr](#) & [twitter](#)

Nashville

Chapter Notes

Have I mentioned Grav is the best beta around? Yes? Oh well, I'll never get tired of saying it :))

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dealing with conflict wasn't exactly one of George's fortes—especially when it came to dealing with his best friend.

They didn't fight often, but when they did, George refused to be the one to confront Dream. As stubborn as Dream was, he always ended up being the one to start their apologetic conversations. Yet it had been almost a day since their fight and Dream had yet to approach him.

It was admittedly a stupid argument. Dream had pressured George to use his powers so they could hide in a tree from Sapnap while playing hide and seek. While Dream had climbed the tree effortlessly, he had left George staring up and wondering how in the world he was supposed to reach him.

"Just try to levitate yourself or something," Dream insisted.

"I'm not supposed to use my powers outside of class."

Dream groaned. "It's not like they'll know. Come on, he's going to find us."

"I'm not going to do it. It's dangerous."

"That's what they've told you, George. But have you ever thought that maybe it's only dangerous because you make it dangerous?"

George frowned, crossing his arms as he glared up at Dream. "You have no idea what it's like to be a Psychic, so how would you know?"

"Just stop making it such a big deal and get up here."

"Oh, so now you think my powers aren't a big deal?"

"Why are you angry? It's not that—"

"Whatever. I'm leaving."

They hadn't spoken since that afternoon, and the next morning during breakfast, they had avoided each other's gazes, leaving Sapnap to sit awkwardly in the middle and try to diffuse the situation.

If George's day wasn't already turning out to be dreadful, then came his Intro to the History of Extramundanes class.

Ms. Lamar had assigned them to create a presentation on an influential figure of their class and type, leaving George to choose from a very limited list of the Psychics who weren't looked at as

complete menaces to society.

His presentation had started off fine. Despite the distracted glances he kept sending Dream who was sitting near the middle of the classroom staring out the window with his arms crossed, he was mostly able to keep the tremble out of his voice, even when a third of his classmates coughed and snickered at random times to purposely throw him off track.

“— and so Julian Hernandez played a crucial role in allowing Psychics a fair trial under verbal oath and a polygraph test during the 2070s.”

It was awkwardly silent for a second, and George wasn't sure if he should end his presentation a certain way.

“Fair enough. Any questions for George?” Ms. Lamar asked the class, not bothering to look up from her stack of grading papers. Not that George wasn't used to being disregarded by her. She wasn't exactly his favorite teacher during his fifth year at AGE, and he certainly wasn't her favorite student.

One of the girls in the front of the class, Alina, raised her hand in an instant.

“Um,” George sheepishly glanced at Ms. Lamar who was too busy writing to pay them any attention. “Yes?”

Alina tilted her head and forced a smile that made George's stomach twist. “How exactly do you justify Psychics having a fair trial when some of them are telepaths?”

“Well, that's what the polygraph tests are for...”

“But the latest polygraph tests are only ninety percent accurate and, as we all know,” she glanced around the classroom with a snicker, the discussion gaining the attention of the few students who had been doing other things while George was presenting, “Psychics are known to be great manipulators.”

George clasped his hands together. He glanced anxiously at his classmates to see if anyone would help. Dream was still too busy looking out the window to pay attention. Sapnap, who was sitting at the back of the classroom, frowned at him before offering a reassuring smile.

Gulping, he tried to keep his voice straight when he answered, “That's, uh, a misconception about Psychics. I, um, explained...” The collar of his shirt felt constricting around his neck, and he pulled on it to breathe better. “... during my presentation that most Psychics receive an unfair trial even with legislation in place due to these harmful—”

“I think it's fair,” Alina interrupted loudly to gain the attention of the whole class. The stare she was giving him made him want to curl up and hide under a rock and never come out again. “My great grandfather was killed because of a Psychic's ‘accidental’ freakout, and if this law had existed back then, that murderer might've gotten away with it and hurt somebody else.”

“If it was accidental then—”

“Just face it. Psychics are dangerous, and I don't even know why they're allowed in this school. You should be locked up in a facility for the safety of everyone else,” she finished with a patronizing tone that almost drove him to excuse himself to the restroom and stay in there for the rest of the class. But before he could, he heard a chair scrape against the floor in the back and saw Sapnap standing up with a determined frown.

“Shut up,” Sapnap said, gaining the attention of everyone including Ms. Lamar. “George has nothing to do with your great grandfather’s accident.”

“Says the boy who’s always burning plants in the building,” another voice called out.

“Yeah. Aren’t you too old to still be having accidents?” shouted someone else.

George flinched when someone slammed their palms on their desk so loud it echoed across the class and made everyone go silent. Looking for the source of the sound, he spotted Dream standing and sending his classmates a glare that could cut straight through someone.

“You’re all assholes for harassing people over something they have no control over.”

It worked for a moment until somebody shouted, “They’re dangerous!”

“That’s the argument normal people out there use on us. By that logic, we’re all dangerous. You guys just don’t like to admit you like bullying people because it makes you feel better.”

“That’s enough of that. Sit down, Dream.” Ms. Lamar raised her voice as she stood from her desk. Dream’s jaw tightened, but once he met his eyes and saw George looking at him with a pleading expression, he hesitantly sat back down. Ms. Lamar’s stern gaze locked onto George. “Get back to your seat, George. And whoever’s next, go. We don’t have all day.”

Dream didn’t take his worried gaze off of George as he shuffled back to his desk a few seats away from his. He offered a small smile to let Dream know he was okay. When he saw Dream perk up and turn around, a warmth enveloped the inside of his chest and he stared at his paper with a smile for the rest of the period.

After class, the trio settled for picking up their lunch from the mess hall and eating in the garden today (if anything to avoid the glares coming from Alina’s table, or as Sapnap liked to call them, the snotty Bio-E table and their pet shifter Harry).

“Thanks for defending me today,” George told both of them, somewhat embarrassed he hadn’t yet been able to stand up for himself on his own.

“Alina’s a bitchy know-it-all. She deserves it,” Sapnap replied and took a bite of his hamburger. He cringed when he did and then opened a flame in his palm to heat it up.

“I’m sorry about yesterday,” Dream said suddenly, gaining George’s attention. “I shouldn’t have pressured you.”

“It’s okay. I shouldn’t have gotten so mad at you.”

They stared at each other for a second until Sapnap exhaled loudly. “Finally. I was starting to think I was going to have to talk to myself every meal.”

George chuckled lightly while Dream burst into wheezes, the corners of his mouth wrinkling in the cute way they always did when he laughed a little too hard.

“George and I are the ones who are supposed to fight, not you two,” Sapnap continued, a crooked grin on display.

“You’re so dumb,” George mumbled while rolling his eyes.

“He’s right, though.” Dream pulled George into a side-hug, causing his head to land against his

chest. George let out a little whine when it did and tried to push him away with a smile, but Dream only pulled him in closer. “We shouldn’t fight.”

“Let me go,” George mumbled even though he made no attempt to fight it.

“Okay, lovebirds, I’m eating here. Y’all need to get a room.”

Dream wheezed while opening his arms to let a red-faced George pull away. George awkwardly grabbed his own burger and began to munch on it.

“Next time you guys fight, I’m going to have to knock some sense into both of you.”

Dream shook his head. Gold glittered in his pupils as he stared at George with such fondness it made his stomach nervous.

“Yeah. If we do, you go ahead and do that.”

The drive to Nashville was uneventful.

They awoke that morning on autopilot and took off in record time. Dream was still refusing to talk to George besides giving basic instructions and comments about the plan. Sapnap continued directing looks toward George through the rearview mirror and signaling toward Dream, and every time, George shook his head.

He wanted to talk to him. He was going to. But it wasn’t the time. Not while Dream was behind the wheel and all four of them were still on edge about the mission.

Next to George, Skeppy stared out the back window with a blank expression, emotions unreadable, or at least George couldn’t read them with Dream’s aura taking up too much space in the car.

When they arrived in the afternoon, the sun was out and bright, cascading onto the bricked, historic buildings and lively faces sauntering in the streets. With the windows rolled down, the waft of nearby restaurant food filled the car and made George’s stomach rumble seeing as they had only munched on some of their snacks as opposed to stopping for breakfast.

Dream parked the car by the hotel they made a reservation in, and they sat there in deliberate silence for a few minutes. George peeked out the window and watched as three teenagers burst out of a shop with a few garments in hand, cackling and looking back at the store owner.

The one furthest back—a boy with shaggy long, black hair—beamed and raised his fist. A gust of wind punched forward, knocking over a few of the chairs and tables in the surrounding area and the store owner as well. George couldn’t help but think about how they were betting their whole lives on a couple of shreds of fabric.

The store owner stood up, raised his fist in anger, and slipped his phone out of his back pocket to dial someone. George grimaced, an ugly feeling spreading in his stomach as he turned his attention toward a couple fondly feeding each other cake at an outdoor restaurant down the road. Upon realizing the scene wasn’t making him feel any better either, he turned toward the front of the car where he noticed Sapnap’s insistent gaze on him.

When are you planning to talk to him?

I will. Just give me time.

With a sigh, Sapnap turned away.

“Skeppy, are you going to put up an argument if we stay here for the day and leave tomorrow morning?”

Skeppy sighed, looking over at Dream and shrugging. “I don’t really have a choice, do I?”

“Nope,” Dream clarified after a moment. Through the mirror, he met George’s eyes for less than a second before he exhaled a deep breath and exited the car. “Let’s go.”

The hotel they chose was much nicer than their previous stays. They reserved two rooms with double beds, both spacious and with pretty blue hues accenting the decor, and a large bathroom in the back as well as a small kitchenette. Sapnap insisted on sharing a room with Skeppy, and neither Dream nor George put up a fight, though they didn’t exactly speak to each other either.

“Let’s meet downstairs at five to eat,” Dream said before dismissing them to their rooms.

Even as they organized their clothing into their bags (Skeppy had bought them all enough clothing to last them the week), they remained silent. The only sound came from the faint rumble of the air conditioner in the corner of the room. George wanted to say something, but every time he opened his mouth, Dream’s heavy irritation spiked and prevented him from even offering a thought.

They met up with Skeppy and Sapnap, and after dinner, Sapnap insisted to separate from them (some excuse about needing more snacks for the road).

Dream had wanted to go shopping alone, but Sapnap pushed George into the outing at the last second without leaving them much room for argument. And so they wandered the energetic evening streets of Nashville, dozens of voices coming from the crowds in every direction as the residents and tourists readied themselves for the nightlife parties at the bars.

He and Dream kept a meter of distance between each other. He missed the warmth that had always accompanied them. Instead, he was now painfully aware of the emptiness between them. Dream walked with his hands in his pockets, shuffling his feet with less energy than usual and facing forward with a blank expression, jaw tightened like he wanted to open his mouth but something was keeping him from it.

George also wanted to talk. He really did. However, he was afraid of their unfinished argument breaking out again, and this time, Sapnap wouldn’t be there to mediate.

He turned away, opting for surveying his surroundings as opposed to focusing on the person stuck in his thoughts and blanketing his heavy emotions on him.

The scene was more animated and energy-filled than he was used to.

A group of girls taking a selfie with a wax figure outside a store. A couple of kids laughing at a homeless man sleeping outside a store with a few cups by him with a sign asking for money to buy food. A random girl shooing them away and looking over her shoulder before dropping some soil into one of the cups and growing a small plant. A chicken with tiny plastic baby arms strutting across the street ever-so-calmly as a car honked at it.

“Um, are you seeing what I’m seeing?” Dream said.

“I—” George blinked once. Twice. Three times. And yet he still couldn’t find the proper words to describe the scene.

A dozen chickens or so, all with varying types of tiny plastic arms attached to their feathers (boxer gloves, baby arms, T-rex arms), were rushing around the street chased down by a huge bearded man twice the size of George and a shorter plump, middle-aged woman holding down her straw hat.

“Billy, quick, round up them chickens before them damn coyotes do what they did to por ol’ uncle Fletcher!”

“Shut up, woman. I’m tryin’!” The man replied with desperation in his voice as he hurled himself at the bigger chicken with T-rex arms that was shaking its wings furiously as it dodged the attack.

“Well try harder!”

One of the chickens (the one with boxer gloves) sauntered over to them, standing in front of them like it was seeking a fight, clucking insistently.

Dream and George exchanged glances before Dream scooped up the chicken into his arms, the plump bird not putting much of a fight when he did.

“Um.”

They stopped by the red pickup truck with a large cage in the back, watching as the woman managed to catch two chickens at once.

“I have your chicken?” Dream raised the bird in his arm before petting its head once.

“Why, thank you, sweetheart.” She opened the cage, pushed the chickens inside, and then took the one in Dream’s arms. She offered them a bright beam before directing, who George assumed was, her husband a glare. Her gentle motherly tone turned into a murderous wail. “Quickly, Billy! Don’t let Fernando run off!”

Billy managed to get a hold of the last chicken (Fernando?), nearly tackling it like a wrestler and struggling to keep it from plucking his arms as it sought its escape and screeched like it was about to be killed. Once all the chickens were safely stored in their cage, Billy and his wife let out a relieved sigh.

The woman eyed the two as they stood awkwardly by the truck, unsure of what to make of the encounter. If George hadn’t known any better, he would’ve thought it was a fever dream, but even pinching the inside of his wrist didn’t help wake him up.

“Well aren’t ya both our heroes?” She shook their hands with too much force and too wide of a beam. “Name’s Shelby.”

“Uh, I’m Dream, and this is George,” Dream replied after taking back his hand and offering a tense smile. “I’m glad you got your, uh...” He glanced at the cage with a puzzled expression and scratched the back of his neck. “Chicken family back..?”

George snorted at the dumb comment and Dream elbowed him upon hearing it. The familiarity of the interaction gave George a warm feeling in his stomach.

Billy’s laugh vaguely reminded George of those mall Santas he had met when he was young.

“Well, some families got dogs, some families got cats, and some families got chickens. One became two and well, the rest is history.”

“We really should be on our—”

“Hold on a second there,” Shelby interrupted Dream as she looked in between them and Billy.

“Say, Billy, why don’t we share some of your famous barbecue?”

Nervously, George replied, “That’s okay. We’ve already eaten, and we have to—”

“Nonsense. Nobody turns down my husband’s barbecue. Billy, give ‘em a plate.”

“‘Course, honey.” Billy walked to the front of the truck and pulled up the hood. Inside, there were a few foiled objects sitting above the engine. From his pocket, Billy practically summoned a pair of tongs and picked up one of them, setting it on a paper plate Shelby had grabbed from the back and opening up the foil to reveal a piece of smoking meat.

Shelby handed it to George who looked absolutely astounded. Never in his life had he met anyone who cooked meat with their engine.

She chuckled, slapping his arms and explaining, “Oh, we’ve been cooking on the road. Y’all know what they say about efficient schedules.”

“Right,” George muttered and sent Dream a hesitant look. Dream shrugged and politely took the next plate Shelby handed him.

“So what are you nice boys doin’ in Nashville?”

“We’re on a road trip,” Dream answered after chewing on a piece of his barbecue, offering a courteous smile. George found himself poking the meat before following Dream’s example. The meat was surprisingly juicy yet crispy and with a savory taste that melted on his tongue like butter.

“That sounds fun.” She served herself a plate and elbowed her husband. “Billy and I just love travelin’. Where are ya boys headed?”

“North.”

“Oh, well, y’all better be careful. The situation’s gettin’ heated up there. Would hate for you to get hurt,” Billy offered, setting down his hood and leaning on it as he ate.

George shuffled his feet uncomfortably and awkwardly glanced away. It seems like wherever he went, the conversation about the EM movement was inevitable. Although it made sense considering it was such a heated issue, it made it a lot harder to ignore compared to being cooped up on the island and turning a blind eye. In the past, it had admittedly made him feel ashamed of himself, but if it meant pretending the world wasn’t a shit hole for people like him, he didn’t care. Or at least, he hadn’t cared before.

Now, witnessing the events firsthand, he wasn’t sure if he would ever be able to pretend everything was fine again. Not when the boy’s panicked face at the cruise ship flashed in his mind every time he thought about it. Not when he recalled the sensation of an aura fading into emptiness back at the diner. Not when he saw the girl’s unconscious face every time he stood in front of a mirror and closed his eyes.

“Our daughter lives in Oregon.” Shelby’s voice snapped him back to reality. Her smile was tense. “She’s a lawyer and a big supporter of the Empower movement. We really admire her views but,” she glanced at her husband unsurely, “we worry about her well-being sometimes, especially with how violent things have gotten recently.”

“It’s unfortunate,” was the only comment Dream offered, sounding just as uncomfortable about the topic as George felt. George bit into his food and tried to chew on the meat as quickly as he could to get out of the situation sooner.

“But beside that.” She smiled wide again and looked in between them. “Are you two related?”

“We’re old friends.” George grew nervous at the sound of Dream’s strained tone.

“Really?” Billy’s crooked, yellow teeth were on display when he asked, “How long have you two known each other?”

Dream hesitated. He seemed unsure of whether he was giving too much information, and when he didn’t answer, George did it for him. “Nine years.”

Shelby’s eyebrows rose high and her smile widened. “Would you look at that? How sweet.” Her eyes glistened with a sweet memory in the light of the sun, and her beam brightened. “My Billy and I were also childhood friends. We went through everythin’ together, from growin’ up to well, adoptin’ a chicken family it seems like, didn’t we, Billy?” She turned to her husband with an affectionate gaze.

“‘Course we did. I still remember when you exploded on me after I bought Pattie Hawkins her Homecoming mum.”

“Damn Pattie was always flirtin’ with ya.”

Billy laughed. “Ya couldn’t even admit you were into me. Ya refused to talk to me for almost a week until I almost got run over by that semi.”

Shelby slapped his shoulder, cackling as she looked back at them. George awkwardly lowered his empty plate.

“Treasure what you have boys. Ya never know when it might be taken from y’all.” She wrapped her arms around her husband’s big belly and buried her head in the crook of his neck.

The words left his gut wrenched, and he watched Dream set his plate on the hood and flash Shelby a polite smile. He turned away before he could catch his gaze.

“We will,” Dream assured her. “Thanks for the food. It was delicious. We really have to get going though...”

“Don’t let us stop ya.” Billy gestured toward the sidewalk.

“Thank you so much for the help,” Shelby said.

Dream nodded with a smile and headed forward alongside George, turning back for a second to wave goodbye after Shelby shouted, “Good luck on y’all’s trip.”

They walked in silence—only focused on the cars cruising by and the groups of people passing next to them. The foot of distance between them was magnetizing, but they continued walking on their own sides. A part of George was still holding back from talking, especially after Shelby’s words had only stung the wound further. He was terrified that another fight would only tear them further apart.

But he had promised Sapnap. He had promised they would talk and work things out. He didn’t want to disappoint him, no matter how badly he wanted to bite his tongue and wait until Dream

made the first move.

“Well that was weird,” he settled for saying.

“Yeah,” Dream agreed, slightly kicking his foot forward.

“I guess we know why the chicken crossed the road now.”

Dream snorted. “You’re so dumb.”

George smiled at the sound of his laughter and his tender voice, hoping it meant Dream was no longer giving him the silent treatment.

“Should be a few minutes from here,” Dream said a few seconds later.

George nodded along. “So what did you think about Billy and Shelby?”

“They were... interesting.”

“You Americans are all so *interesting*,” he mimicked Dream’s bemused tone with a widening grin. “What the hell is even a mum?”

“Oh please,” he replied with a laugh, “says the British guy while taking a road trip through the South.” Then he shrugged. “I think it’s some Texan tradition or something like that. Ask Sapnap, he’d probably know.”

“See? You’re all so weird. ”

“You’re the ones who chug a gallon of tea every day.”

George scoffed. “Now you’re just stereotyping.”

Rolling his eyes, Dream elbowed his side. “You say that like you don’t stereotype us.”

“Are you saying Southerners aren’t weird?”

After a moment of contemplation, Dream laughed half-heartedly. “You got me there.”

It was during the second moment of silence that George’s gut started twisting and he inhaled a tense breath. It’s now or never.

“What happened back at the thrift shop,” he started, waiting to see if Dream would shut him down, but he didn’t. Instead, he listened as they walked alongside each other. It gave George enough confidence to continue. “I didn’t mean it—what I said. I was just really frustrated and I felt really guilty and I really shouldn’t have taken it out on you. Not in the way I did and—”

George slipped his hands in his pockets and rubbed the fabric while he gathered his thoughts. He waited to see if Dream would say anything, but he seemed to be waiting for George to finish first. “Truth is what I did was wrong. It was selfish and I was only thinking about myself and us and Bad and I didn’t consider what it would mean for the girl.” He lowered his gaze, gulping as he did.

“Bad would be really disappointed in me, but I just—” He stopped walking, and he shut his eyes tight and bit back the tears, his words growing more loaded and rushed. “I panicked and I know it’s no excuse but if we stepped in we would’ve had to use our powers and then they’d be after us and the girl and who knows what would’ve happened after that.”

When he opened his eyes, he realized Dream was standing barely a few centimeters from him, regarding him with an unreadable expression. His silence spiked his nerves tenfold, and he awaited a response. He resisted the urge to get inside his head, not that he would even be able to decipher his hidden thoughts. Dream was good at keeping things from George when he wanted. Too good. It scared him—being so close to the person he cared about most yet also knowing he had the ability to completely shield himself from George. Despite that, George trusted Dream with all his heart. And that was what scared him the most.

The longer Dream took to respond, the bigger the pit of dread expanded in his stomach. His head was thumping, and it felt like he was hanging off the edge of a mountain. When he heard Dream exhale, he almost lost his breath.

“I was wrong too,” Dream admitted. “I know it was hard for you to see that girl get taken away. I shouldn’t have used it against you. I know you did what you did because you were afraid. It made me angry too and I was disappointed to see it and I blamed you for it but...” He scratched the back of his neck and glanced away unsurely. “You were right. If I really wanted to do something, I could’ve done it. But I hesitated.” His gaze lowered, and George finally felt Dream share a piece of him, and although it was small, he could feel it—the delicate shame spilling through his aura, a sort of vulnerability that was rare of him to let George see. It set off a special warmth in his chest.

“You shouldn’t blame yourself, Dream. It wasn’t your fault—what happened. It was wrong that we didn’t do anything, but even if we hadn’t been there, it still would’ve happened.” George stepped forward, his hand hesitantly reaching for his cheek but stopping midway up. Instead, he brought it down, his fingers grazing Dream’s wrist until he took his hand. Their eyes locked. “Don’t blame yourself.”

Dream’s stare was encapsulating in every way. It was magnetic. Urged him to finally acknowledge this strange energy between them. This present pull constantly driving George to seek the heat of his body, the tenderness in his gaze, the igniting spark every time Dream’s fingers grazed his jaw.

It had been there for a long time—George knew that. Those passing moments that he would store away in the back of his head for years to come, convincing himself he would eventually come to terms with them but knowing full well he would try everything to avoid them. There was this addicting glow in Dream’s aura, the one that Dream often held back, that only spilled through on certain occasions, when they laughed a little too hard or when George buried his head in the crook of his neck. George had always denied it.

It was only now he realized—that he remembered—the horrifying sensation of falling into the depth of his gold eyes. It was the one George thought he had successfully pushed back far enough. The one that scared him almost as much as losing control.

Their faces had gotten progressively closer in the few seconds they had been staring at each other, so close Dream’s breath had tickled his nose and sent little red tremors through his cheeks. In a moment of panic, George drew the emotion back in, pushed it toward the void where it belonged, and he pulled back, hurriedly turning away.

“We should pick up those snacks and get back to the hotel to rest.”

“I’m not tired though,” Dream protested, grabbing his wrist again and pulling him into him, chest against chest. George refused to get lost in his eyes again, so instead, he found his gaze glued to the streetlight behind him that had flickered on at one point during their conversation. He felt Dream’s hand graze his jaw again. After a moment, he whispered, “What happened wasn’t your fault either, George.”

George swallowed. They both knew that was a lie. Dream had been the one to stand up for the girl. Dream had always been the hero—the valiant one who put himself in harm’s way for people.

George? He only ever looked out for himself. He only ever brought trouble to those around him. To his parents. To his classmates. To his friends. To the girl at the diner. His powers were the closest he could have to a curse. And George had only ever wanted to lock them away and pretend they weren’t there. Biting the inside of his mouth, a chill spread across George’s shoulders, even with Dream’s abnormally warm body leaning in front of him like a heater.

What are you so scared of? the voice inside his head whispered.

“We— let’s go back,” he stuttered, crunching his eyebrows as his head began to thump again. A flash of red crossed his eyesight. He pulled away from Dream’s hold instantly. He looked around, his breath hard and heavy.

When he realized there was nothing there, he turned again and noticed Dream scanning him in concern. “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

He stepped a little closer, his hands reaching for George but hesitating, unsure if he had been the one to cause his freak out.

“I’m fine,” he managed, leaning toward a nearby parking meter to steady himself and close his eyes. It took him a moment to regain the natural rhythm of his breath. He thought back to the disaster at the cruise, to the girl at the diner, to his nightmares, to the shadow’s presence behind him.

Sarah’s words echoed in his head repeatedly, panicked thoughts and concerns all jumbled up inside. He couldn’t lose control. Not here. Not now. Not ever.

“Fine,” he repeated, more trying to convince himself than Dream.

“You don’t look fine.” Dream held a finger to his chin and raised it. George closed his eyes. “Look at me.”

George hesitated, but he gave in. Dream’s concern was evident in not only his expression but the waves inundating George and causing his heart to stick to his throat and his tongue to feel heavy in his mouth.

“I’ve been having nightmares,” he admitted, exhaling with a heavy breath. “I think something’s wrong, Dream. I don’t know what to do.”

Dream’s finger caressed his cheek and he sighed. Pulling him closer, he pushed their foreheads together and held the sides of his head with both hands.

“It’ll be okay. It’s probably just stress. You need to relax.” Dream closed his eyes like he was breathing him in. His aura was soft and soothing, but George’s anxiety was still too high for it to really help.

“But I—”

Dream placed a finger over his mouth to shush him. George stared at him with widening eyes. An unrecognizable look crossed his expression—one that made George feel like he was melting under his gaze.

Dream’s fingers slowly shifted so that his thumb was caressing the top of his bottom lip, making

his mouth open barely a millimeter and sparking an electric current through George's body. A soft pink tinted Dream's cheeks, and he offered an unusually timid smile. His finger fell away.

"Let's just run these errands and get back to the hotel. Don't overthink it. You'll freak yourself out."

George allowed himself to melt in the calming waves embracing him like a warm hug, making his heartbeat slow. He focused solely on Dream's forehead against his. Fluttering his eyes shut, he faded into the serene landscape of Dream's emotions. He adored these moments—the ones in which Dream opened his heart and shared this intimate part of himself. Like he was opening a secret only for the two of them, only for George.

"Thank you," George mumbled.

"Anything for you," Dream whispered back, his breathy words brushing over his nose and lips enticingly. And this time, instead of closing himself off, he let himself float within the recesses of Dream's mind, even if he didn't quite understand all the fuzzy and warm emotions washing over them.

It was a dangerous game—this dance of warm colors between them. One that risked the near lifetime of memories that bound them together. But George chose to push those thoughts away. If only for this moment.

It struck him on a Tuesday afternoon when he was seventeen.

He was watching the Bios scramble out of the stadium to change after their training before one of their semester assemblies. Worriedly alternating between checking his watch and glancing at the open doors, George impatiently tapped his foot on the concrete and leaned against a light post.

Dream was one of the last students to exit the stadium. Unlike the others, he ambled toward George like they had all the time in the world, carrying his backpack on one shoulder and swiping the sweaty hair strands sticking to his forehead aside. He had already changed out of his suit, and he was wearing a white shirt that stuck to his body with his sweat, not leaving much to the imagination.

Dream is hot.

The abruptness of the thought made his face burn in the light of the sun. His heartbeat quickened a little, and before he could make a fool out of himself by blushing at his friend's attractive post-workout look or blabbering out something embarrassing, he turned up his nose and grumbled, "Gross," when Dream stopped in front of him.

Dream snickered and tilted his head in an adorable way. "You're such an idiot."

George looked away, more so to hide his blush. The two fell into step beside each other as they made their way toward the auditorium.

"You could've at least showered."

"Last time we were late to an assembly, Galilea almost ate me alive."

"And yet you walk like a snail."

Dream elbowed him and made George squeak in surprise. "And yet you still waited for me." He laughed. "Simp."

"If I didn't, your prefect would corner me to interrogate me about your whereabouts."

"Yeah, Gali needs to chill out. Last time she caught me sneaking out to your dorm in the middle of the night, I swear, she almost wolfed out right there and tore me to pieces."

George cracked a smile. "I mean, it was a full moon."

Dream huffed. "What is this? Dusk or something? Shifters shifting at the full moon and challenging Bio-E's to win a girl over?"

"You've got it wrong. It was Eduardo who won Becca and challenged Caleb."

"Oh come on, don't tell me you actually read the books?" Dream turned to him, amusement sparkling in his eyes. At his silence, Dream burst into wheezes and had to stop to slap his thigh hysterically, leaning on George's side. "Oh my God, you did. That's cringe!"

George pouted, face flushed both from the topic and Dream's proximity.

"Everyone was talking about it when the movie came out. I wanted to see what the big deal was."

"Was it worth it at least?"

"Not really. The protagonist was a creep, the author knew next to nothing about Bios, and she made shifters look like half-breeds who couldn't control their 'primal' urges. Too horny for my taste."

Dream cracked into laughter again which forced them to stop outside the classroom building so he could catch his breath. George groaned and finally grabbed his wrist and dragged him toward the building.

"We're going to be late and then Gali will really let go of her primal urges to end us where we stand."

As George reached for the door, Dream took hold of the hand around his wrist and yanked him into him, pressing them together by the door as the sides of his mouth crinkled with laughter.

George froze. He stared up at Dream like a deer in the headlights and swallowed. His heartbeat thumped like drums vibrating all across his body.

Why the hell was he reacting like this now?

Dream had always been this touchy and weird with him, but George had never actually noticed how the perspiration on his neck made his skin glow in the sun. Never noticed the way his laughter felt like pleasant tickles when he pressed their bodies together. Never noticed Dream's eyes drowning him in pure liquid gold. Never noticed how pleasant the smell of pine was on him. How plushy and soft and inviting Dream's lips looked from such a close distance.

The door burst open next to them, and George pushed Dream back. He stared at Galilea in shock. Dream's laughter finally died off and he looked as surprised as George.

"What are you two still doing out here? Get to your sections before I mark you down for detention again."

They hurried inside, and upon separating to go to their respective class sections, George couldn't help but steal glances at Dream on the other side of the auditorium as he pondered what exactly had just happened. At one point during the orientation, Dream locked eyes with him and grinned, making his ears go hot again.

George didn't look at him again after that.

"Fruit, posture straight."

"Techno, feet stable."

"Dream, stop looking at the benches and focus."

George snorted when Dream stuck out his tongue one last time before turning back to Coach Harris to follow the instructions they were given.

It was a nice Friday afternoon, and George had just gotten out of his meditation session and joined Sapnap at the stadium to wait for Dream to finish his training. Mr. Harris was going especially hard on them seeing as New AGE was approaching quickly which meant the first round of the championship against their rival school was right around the corner.

There were a couple of other students scattered around the benches, but mostly, the place was empty as the end of the week was usually busy with parties and events—the latest which was a Halloween Bash at the beach.

George hated parties, and he was glad it was rare for them to attend them, if anything because they preferred to hang out and do their own thing: playing video games, camping out in the forest, or messing around with the rolling staircases at the library.

*"I'm just saying, that asshole thinks he's got big balls and everything but have you **seen him** in gorilla form?" Sapnap cracked up and slapped his leg in hysterics.*

George watched Dream as he nailed his cartwheel on the pole on the first try. He chuckled and nodded like he was listening to Sapnap despite being too focused on the way Dream had turned to George in excitement to check if he had seen him pull off his trick.

"Are you even listening to me?"

"Huh?" George glanced at Sapnap in surprise. "Oh, yeah, uh..." He thought for a second. "You were talking about, um, gorillas?"

Sapnap blinked, unimpressed. "Maybe if you weren't so busy sending kissy faces to Dream, you'd know that I was talking about that dumbass new guy, Jessie, who thinks he's all that."

*"I was **not** sending kissy faces to Dream." George's cheeks reddened as he recalled the sorta almost-kiss they had a few weeks earlier. The one he spent so long trying not to overthink and the one that he and Dream had been avoiding the topic of.*

"Mhm."

"I wasn't."

"I don't understand why y'all don't just go make out already. You're so obviously head over heels

for each other and it's disgusting." Sapnap reached a finger inside his mouth and gagged.

George scoffed. "First of all, I don't want to make out with Dream. Second of all, even if I did, Dream isn't into me. And third, you're the disgusting one."

"And you're too fucking dumb to not see that he practically drools for you every time you put on one of his hoodies."

"No, he doesn't." George frowned, trying to think back to those times he had purposefully stolen his favorite hoodie to annoy him.

He hadn't drooled, had he? Then again, George had been so distracted showing off how the hoodie drowned him and reached him almost mid-thigh to notice how Dream had reacted.

Sapnap huffed. "You two are so dense."

"We—I am not." George pursed his lips and glanced at his lap. "Besides. Even if he did have feelings for me, it would be impossible for me not to know. Empath, remember?"

"Idiot, remember?" Sapnap mocked, and George slapped his arm hard. "Ow. Okay, okay. Chill out."

Taking a more serious tone, Sapnap cleared his throat and continued. "Look. I've known you two for what, almost seven years? I know you guys. You're both totally in love with each other and you refuse to see it. The day you get married, I swear, you'll be thanking me for making you realize that." Sporting a cocky smile, he crossed his arms.

George rolled his eyes, though he looked up with a slight tinge of hope as he considered Sapnap's observations. Although Sapnap could be an asshole, a moron, an idiot, and all three at once sometimes, he never lied when it came to their friendship, and he offered his opinions in good faith.

"Do you really think so?"

"I know so," Sapnap told him with confidence. "I think you should tell him."

George whined, burying his face behind his hands. "That sounds like a terrible idea."

"I'm telling you he's sooo into you. Just man up and do it. Why don't you just ask him to talk after training? So y'all can go cuddle or do whatever you do at your little dating tree."

As George attempted to slap Sapnap, the other boy jerked back and opened a flame in his hand, holding a finger up with his other hand to keep George back.

"Stupid." George rolled his eyes again and backed off.

Once Coach Harris deemed training was over, George and Sapnap made their way down the stadium benches, opting for jumping over the railing instead of going all the way around. Dream was grabbing his stuff from the benches while in conversation with one of the shifter girls in his class.

As George approached, he couldn't help the weird feeling edging at his stomach when he noticed how close the girl was standing and how wide Dream's smile looked as he talked to her. He exchanged a puzzled glance with Sapnap who just shrugged.

"Yo, Dream," Sapnap called out.

Dream finally took his attention off the girl, smiled, and waved them over. When they got there, he said, "Hey guys, this is Tala. Tala, these are my best friends George and Sapnap."

Tala smiled sheepishly and nodded her head.

"Good to meet you." Sapnap flashed her a smile and then turned to Dream. "Ready to head out?"

Dream's hesitant expression made George's gut further sink into itself. Scratching the back of his neck and offering an unsure smile, Dream looked between Tala and his friends and said, "Um, I'm going to have to take a rain check. Tala invited me to the party at the beach but, uh..." He glanced at George, somewhat nervously. "You guys could come too? It sounds like it'll be fun."

He was going out. With a girl. Sapnap had been wrong. It was clear that his feelings were not reciprocated.

Nobody said anything. George unlocked his gaze from Dream's, pretending to be paying attention to Mr. Harris as he shouted out some announcements for the coming week to passing students.

Sapnap was the one to break the silence, and his comment only made George send him a confused look. "I think we'll pass on that. Parties are just not our thing."

He was lying. Sapnap loved parties. If anything, he was always the one to insist they go and Dream was always the one to say no because he knew George hated them.

Somewhat surprised, Dream was about to reply before Tala interrupted them. "We should go... Coach looks like he's roping unsuspecting students into his critiques on their routines, and you know how long he can go on for."

Dream chuckled awkwardly and glanced in between them before waving goodbye and walking off with Tala, oddly close to each other.

George swallowed and rubbed his arm lightly, trying not to accidentally project his disappointment. He already felt embarrassed enough.

"You want to go beg Bad to unlock the theater room for us with his PA privileges so we can watch a movie or play video games on the big screen?"

George pursed his lips and offered a hesitant smile. "Yeah. Let's go."

Sapnap had insisted he go for it, even after the whole Tala incident.

Despite George's endless excuses, Sapnap begged for George to tell Dream about his dumb 'crush.' Apparently, he was certain that the Tala party date had just been Dream not wanting to let Tala down when she asked him out.

George wasn't so sure about that. However, he had grown tired of Sapnap continuously bringing the topic up, so he decided he wanted to put an end to it once and for all.

Thus, near the end of their Intermediate EM Biology course before lunch, he scribbled a little message for Dream asking to meet up at their tree because he wanted to talk and sent the folded piece of paper floating under the desks until it landed on Dream's lap across the room.

Dream looked confused for a second before he read it and then glanced over his shoulder to send

George a smile. He wrote something on it while pretending to be listening to the teacher's monotone lecture at the front of the classroom and then let it fall on the ground.

George levitated the paper back to him and opened it to read Dream's chicken scratch writing.

sound good :) i have something to tell you too

He snorted and folded the paper, burying it in his pocket and looking up again to pay attention to Dr. Abigail as she answered a student's question on how shapeshifters didn't end up naked when they shifted to their human form in their suits.

Fifteen minutes after class, Dream joined George who was sitting at their tree reading his new novel. George shut his book and scooted over to let Dream sit by him.

"I have something to tell you," they both said at the same time and shared a laugh.

"Go ahead," George said.

"Okay, well..." Dream glanced nervously at his clasped hands, and George couldn't help but raise a curious eyebrow as he felt the unusual soft waves of anxiety rolling off of him. "You remember Tala, right?"

George's gut twisted, and he almost felt like his heart crawled up his esophagus when he nodded.

"So..." Dream cleared his throat and smiled wide when he met George's eyes. "We're dating now."

His breath almost hitched and his tongue was dry when he repeated, "You're dating?"

"Yeah." Dream nodded, looking pretty excited to share the news with his best friend. George, on the other hand, felt like throwing up.

"Oh."

Instantly, Dream's happy expression fell and he furrowed his eyebrows. "What? You don't think she's cool?"

"No, Tala's great." George forced a smile. "She's great." He glanced away, trying to swallow up the aching heaviness of rejection and keep his eyes from watering. "Really great. I think you guys are perfect for each other."

Dream was quiet for a second before he asked, slowly and softly, "Are you okay?"

"'m fine. Just unexpected is all."

Dream seemed like he was struggling to find the right words, and he settled for saying, "What is it that you were going to tell me?"

"I—" George choked on his words.

"Aw come on, Georgie, we're best friends. You know you don't have to be scared to tell me anything," Dream insisted, giggling softly and pressing closer to him.

Best friends—it's all they were. All they would ever be.

George swallowed, the words burning in his stomach. He chuckled uncomfortably, slightly leaning

away from Dream and playing with a loose root next to him.

“Nothing. Just that... I, uh, got a perfect score on my Psychic Eval and Sarah said I might be able to travel to England again next year if I keep it up.”

“George. That’s amazing!” Dream wrapped his arms around his shoulders and pulled him into a tight embrace, making every muscle in George’s body tense up. Dream seemed to notice pretty quickly, and he let him go. “Sorry, did I hurt you?”

“No, it’s fine. Just been on edge recently. It’s not your fault.”

Dream’s concerned expression didn’t help the swirl of confusing feelings rushing through his head. “What’s wrong? Have you told Sarah?”

George snorted and glanced at the ground. “I’ll be fine. I think it’s just me.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

Hesitantly, Dream dropped the subject. “Okay. If you say so.”

After a few minutes of silence, he asked, “Can we go get lunch before next period starts? I’m gonna pass out by the last period if I don’t eat now.”

George snorted again, though they both noticed the absent humor in his tone. “Sure.”

“She broke up with me.”

It was the first thing Dream said when he slumped down on the spot next to George on a Saturday afternoon months after he had started dating Tala.

It hurt. Not just because Dream’s sadness, regret, and rejection were pricking through George’s head and poisoning his thoughts but also because it hurt George to know Tala had really meant that much to him. Would he have felt the same if it was George?

He pushed the thought to the back of his head and instead focused on swallowing down his jealousy and comforting Dream.

It was funny, really. For how often Dream spent comforting him, George wasn’t nearly as good at it. Sure, he was good at calming him down when he got angry or frustrated, but even though Dream was an open book and more emotional than him, he wasn’t one to get sad often. It broke his heart, and George almost wanted to stand up and face Tala, demanding an explanation as to why she had hurt his best friend.

But he pushed those feelings down too and instead he scooted close to him, gently caressing his blonde locks and pressing Dream’s head onto his shoulder.

Dream melted into his hold almost instantly and he turned his head a little to press his nose into George’s neck. George swayed his finger back and forth on his shoulder the same way Dream had done for him every time Sarah let him know he couldn’t go back home yet.

“She said we weren’t spending enough time together, and she didn’t think I liked her the way she liked me.” Dream’s voice was strangely void of emotion, and it frustrated George to no end. He

hated when he shielded his emotions away from him, but he also wasn't going to demand he cry in front of him or break their mind block and let George melt into the whole of him.

Despite wearing his heart on his sleeve, over the years, George had come to realize Dream was rather private with his deepest-held emotions—those which he didn't understand. He was especially good at blocking them out. And if George knew one thing about his best friend, it was that he craved to control every aspect of himself. In a way, it wasn't much different from George.

“Did you?” George found himself asking. He almost regretted it. But Dream didn't seem upset by the question, and he answered it truthfully.

“I don't know. But I don't think anything I said would've mattered anyway.”

They steeped in silence for a passing moment. He let the embrace of the calm Spring breeze comfort their sorrows. Dream wrapped his arms around George's waist and pulled him closer.

George swallowed, the action making his heart beat all the bit faster. He knew Dream would be able to hear it. He always heard when his pulse changed, and sometimes, he even poked fun at him for it. He hoped he wouldn't think weird of it.

“Sometimes we're so convinced something is true that it causes us to misinterpret the people we love the most,” George said, his fingers stopping their motion. The heat of Dream's skin tickled his fingertips like his sole presence was charged with electricity that would ignite George at any moment.

“You're right,” Dream replied after a second of contemplating the thought.

Their mind block fell, and George felt an overwhelming wave of warmth and fondness enwrap them, so much his breath hitched. It embraced George's chest like no other emotion had before—squeezed him so tight he thought his lungs would collapse and his heart would stop beating. It was terrifying and ecstatic all at once, and George wished he could burn this moment into his memory to treasure it for the rest of his life. He found himself gripping Dream's shoulder a little tighter at the motion. He squeezed his eyes shut, and he was glad Dream couldn't see the single tear that rolled down his cheek and dripped onto his locks.

It was addicting, this dangerous sway of emotions playing around them. One wrong move could shatter a decade of accidental touches, unsaid words, and pent-up ardor. And so he railed them back in, forced himself to build their mind block again and press back those forbidden feelings from spilling through. He felt a pang of Dream's confusion the moment George successfully brought their mind block back up.

After a second, Dream murmured, “I love you.” So quiet George almost thought it was his mind playing a sick trick on him. He couldn't let himself believe it meant what he wanted it to mean.

Dream was hurt. It wasn't the time to bring up his silly crush. It wasn't the time to disturb their dynamic with a confession that Dream would no doubt not reciprocate. Because George knew how openly affectionate Dream was with his friends—how deeply he cared about them. And he was convinced Dream did love him. But it wasn't in the way George wanted him to love him.

“You're my best friend,” George forced the painful words out. “I love you too.”

He felt Dream's emotions fade into nothingness. He frowned, opening his mouth to tell him he didn't have to hide them from him, but before he could, Dream spoke.

“I have to get to practice.” Dream's words held an unfamiliar edge to them, one that hadn't been

there when he had gotten there.

“Do you want me to walk with you?”

Dream pulled away, standing up and facing away from him. “It’s fine. I need some time for myself.” Although Dream hadn’t sounded like he wanted to cry a few minutes ago, it certainly sounded like he would burst into tears now.

“Are you okay?” George’s voice was barely a peep, unsure if he had done something wrong to warrant such a foreign reaction from him.

Dream exhaled. “I’m fine. I’ll see you later.”

He left without meeting his gaze, and after watching him disappear behind the dorm building, George realized his face was stained with tears that he couldn’t contain. He wasn’t sure if they were his or Dream’s. But regardless of whose emotions they belonged to, for the rest of the afternoon, he cried.

Chapter End Notes

Are those tears in your eyes? Well, if they are, you should drink some water, I heard it gets you pretty dehydrated. If they aren't, you should take a sip anyway. Actually, just drink the whole bottle. Please? For me? Stay hydrated y'all!

This barely marks past the halfway point of the full story. We have three chapters to go before the next hiatus and then, well, let's just say things get VERY exciting after that :))

I love y'all so much. I've had such a hard time these past few weeks due to various reasons, and your comments make getting through things so rewarding at the end of the week! Fridays are literally my favorite days at this point because of y'all <3

We're almost at 600 kudos and y'all have no idea how much that means to me! Thank you!!! From the beginning, I made it a distant goal to get to 1000 kudos for the first time since I started writing fanfiction, so I'm happy to see that we're steadily heading that way :D

Con una sonrisa gigante,

Light <3

PS: New fic dropping for dnf day week 6 sometime today, so look out for that :))

[tumblr](#) & [twitter](#)

Denver Meltdown

Chapter Notes

As usual, thank Grav for their wonderful help in ensuring the quality of these chapters
<3

***IMPORTANT: [Potential trigger warning disclaimer](#) ***

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Missouri was a breeze. George barely remembered any of it, seeing as they opted for eating in the car and driving straight through for ten hours, Dream and Sapnap taking turns at the wheel. He also slept through most of the ride, fading in and out of consciousness, blank visions and old memories scrolling through his mind. Luckily, he didn't have any nightmares. Though he could still feel the tense presence in the back of his head like someone was constantly at his shoulder, watching.

They stopped at their third run-down motel in the-middle-of-nowhere, Kansas. This one was the smallest by far, with a parking lot of only ten spaces, three of which were taken up by the large dumpster in the back.

The desk lady was nice enough, although her smile was too big and rehearsed. It unnerved him, especially with the way she was staring at George like she recognized him. Their single room with two queen-sized beds was decent enough. There was a TV with an antenna and it smelled faintly of artificial lemon air freshener. The bathroom was also the cleanest they had, even if small.

Sapnap sprawled out on the first bed the second they walked in, opening his arms and legs wide and closing his eyes like he was readying to trace a snow angel into the sheets.

"You look dumb," was all George said. Sapnap stuck his tongue out at him.

Dream moved to the front of the room and regarded them with a sigh. "Alright, children. We get back on the road first thing tomorrow to get to Denver."

"That's like a half a day drive," Sapnap whined.

"Then we better rest up."

Groaning, Sapnap buried his head into a pillow and released a muffled scream into it.

Skeppy seemed a little calmer. His aura felt less uninviting and more placid. The previous night when Dream and George had gotten to the hotel, they had walked into the odd sight of Skeppy dead asleep snuggled right beside Sapnap on one of the beds with a movie playing in the background. Sapnap had put a finger over his lips and hushed them before they could make any noise. Dream and George had exchanged looks, but they hadn't questioned it. All George knew was that Skeppy had woken up in a better mood the next morning, and it was all that mattered to him.

It was boring, to say the least. When George wasn't enraptured by his novel (which he only had a few pages left of), he was either napping or watching the 24-hour rom-com marathon Sapnap had put on.

An hour before the night came, Dream suggested they go watch the sunset to get some air, and having nothing better to do, they all agreed. Thus, there they were—all four lying and sitting on the back of the pick-up watching how the sun fell behind the flat horizon of vegetation extending for hundreds of miles.

George's shoulder was rubbing against Dream's, and he found himself swallowing. The closeness wasn't unfamiliar, but ever since their moment back in Nashville, it was like a flip had suddenly switched back on. Every little graze was charged with a dozen bolts of electricity. Every gaze was packed with so much intensity, he felt it burning through his skin.

"Have y'all thought about what'll happen after we save Bad?"

He contemplated Sapnap's question. Although he had definitely thought about all the dangers their mission was posing, about everything that could go wrong, he hadn't exactly considered what would happen if everything went right.

They couldn't exactly go back to living normally. If Bad was okay (which he didn't want to think about the alternate possibility), then they would escape, but they wouldn't exactly be able to return to AGE and pretend nothing happened. The headmaster would know and so would the woman they saw him talking to. Sarah would know. His parents would likely be informed as well. If the news figured out their identities, then the whole country would too. They would be antagonized for breaking into a government facility. For the trouble they had caused on the cruise. For everything.

What would happen then?

Nausea enwrapped his stomach as his thoughts slipped into risky territory. He had to close his eyes to breathe, focusing his mind on anything besides the impending doom they were barreling toward. In this case, it was Dream's soothing aura beside him, the gentle scent of pine etched to his person, and the fuzzy vibrations traveling up his shoulder as he shifted ever-so-slightly.

"We go back to AGE?" was Skeppy's unsure response.

"Can we really do that?" George muttered, clasping his hands above his stomach. "They could expel us."

After a moment of silence, Dream, who had been stuck in a quiet and pensive state, spoke. "We have no option but to let the public know. Government intervention at AGE is going to cause a scandal, especially after they kidnapped students for some sketchy project. There's no way this will go badly for us if we make it."

"That is if we make it," George stated on instinct.

Skeppy's reply was unsurprising, but it came out more aggressive than was usual for him. "We will."

"How are we going to let the public know?" Sapnap said.

"I don't know," Dream answered honestly.

After a second of tense silence, Sapnap spoke again, his tone hesitant and weak. "What happens if we don't make it?"

The question had been haunting their shadows all throughout the mission. Nobody but George seemed to want to consider it—their potential failure. Nobody wanted to think about what could happen to Bad, what could happen to them.

“We won’t give up,” Skeppy responded in an offended tone, as if just the thought of failure meant they were giving up.

Dream exhaled, heavy and loud. “We’ll be smart about it. If at any point I sense we’re in danger, we retreat.”

“But what about—”

“We retreat,” he repeated, cutting Skeppy off. “There’s no way we’ll be able to save Bad if we get caught or hurt or worse. We’ll find another way.”

Skeppy made a noise like he wanted to say something, but he seemed to decide against it.

George sighed, desperately wanting to change the subject. His fingers were beginning to tremble, and inside his head, he felt a whirlpool of energy building. He contained it, breathed in like he did during his meditation classes, like he did before every psych-evaluation he received during the year, like he did every time he felt his abilities slipping. Beside him, Dream turned his head, like he could feel George trying so hard to contain this unprecedented surge of energy circulating his body.

Are you okay?

He wasn’t.

He was burning up from the inside. He was aching to release this pent-up power he didn’t realize had been slowly building, so much he felt a single graze would combust him. But he also didn’t want to worry Dream. He just needed a little time and a quieter environment.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” he announced as he sat up and hopped out of the truck bed. Dream sent him a questioning stare, and George did his best to offer a reassuring smile.

He couldn’t pinpoint the moment he rushed into the bathroom, not until he heard the door slam shut behind him. His hands gripped the sides of the sink momentarily, focusing on the dripping of the cheap faucet before him.

Plip. Plip. Plip.

A vortex swirled in his stomach and a wave of nausea phased through him. He leaned all his weight on the sink, tried to forget the way his legs turned to jelly. The way the floor felt like it was getting further and further from his feet.

Squeezing his eyelids tight, he inhaled deeply. Honed all his senses into a single thought. Ignored the way his heart was thumping so hard his ribcage could shatter.

Focus, he repeated in his head. *Not now.*

Plip. Plip. Plip.

Something cold and ruthless inside his head was mercilessly banging against his skull. It was getting harder to breathe. He couldn’t tell how much time was passing. Had it been a second? A minute?

Power pumped through his veins, energizing every muscle in his body and making it contract, making all the hairs in his arms and legs stand tall like he'd just been electrocuted.

He desperately wanted to set it loose. To lose himself in the vortex and feel the euphoric release of pure energy flowing out of him. To let his powers run rampant and embrace them in full.

Let me out, it told him. Why are you so afraid of me?

His throat was dry and cracked. It hurt to even swallow.

Why are you so afraid of us?

His fingertips pricked with needle points, no longer able to feel the cold porcelain sink below. His head felt detached from his body like his limbs were all a part of a puzzle slowly being dismantled.

Why are you so afraid of yourself?

In the course of a second, he gasped involuntarily, finally opening his eyes. Two white flashes stared back at him, lit up his pale aspect. He tried to recoil in shock, but his soles weren't touching the ground and when he looked down, he realized he was floating. So was every other small object in the room.

The palpitations across his body only grew faster as he struggled to catch his breath, struggled to reach down and grip the sink again. His body was slowly moving toward the ceiling, and no matter how hard he concentrated, he couldn't float back down. The sink was still dripping but it was barely audible, a faint echo in his head like it was miles away.

Please stop, he begged.

Let me out, it whispered.

The knock on the door sounded like a gunshot going off beside his ear, and all his senses hit him like an eighteen-wheeler to the chest. He crashed onto the floor and so did the soap dispenser, towel rack, and shampoo bottles all at once. Trying to regain his balance, he grasped the sink and pulled himself up, looked at his reflection and breathed in relief when he saw his eyes were brown again.

Plip. Plip. Plip.

He finally turned the faucet on and splashed cold water on his face, feeling hazy and drugged and unsure of whether he had just imagined it all. But the toppled-over dispenser on the sink seemed to suggest otherwise.

"George?" Dream asked outside the door, knocking again. "I heard a crash. Are you okay?"

Pressing his back against the door, he took a second to recuperate. As he fixed all the fallen objects in the room, he caught sight of the large crack at the very top of the mirror. He gulped down his apprehension and hoped Dream would miss it or that he would think it had already been there. He hoped that maybe if he didn't tell Dream, he would be able to forget it himself. And maybe then, it wouldn't happen again. Maybe it was all in his head—it was all just his mind playing tricks on him. He just had to convince himself he was fine, and it would successfully prevent another freak out. But if he admitted to himself he was slowly edging toward another loss of control, it would only push him over the edge. And they were too close to their goal for that to happen now.

"George?"

He opened the door and regarded Dream's concerned gaze blankly. Clearing his throat, he said, "I'm fine. Just needed to clear my thoughts."

Dream didn't buy it. He sighed and crossed his arms, staring him down more seriously now. "Tell me what's going on."

George pursed his lips. Worrying him would only deter from the mission, and they were too far to back down now. Even if his powers seemed to grow more unstable by the day, there was really nothing they could do besides take it. At this point, George felt like a ticking time bomb, and all he wanted to do was save Bad in time—otherwise... he wasn't sure what would happen.

"It's nothing."

"Since when do we hide things from each other?"

George bit the inside of his mouth hard, the comment leaving a bad taste in his mouth. He watched Dream with a stare void of emotion.

"You've always held back emotions around me. You don't have the right to say that."

Dream stepped back a little, somewhat surprised—as if he didn't realize George had taken notice to all those times his emotions went vacant, every time his aura lost its warmth like he was holding back. Like he was hiding something from George.

For years, George had pushed it to the back of his head, reassuring himself by saying it was just Dream wanting some privacy, not wanting to ask about it because he didn't want his best friend to feel uncomfortable. Why couldn't Dream do the same for him now?

Sighing, Dream hung his head and his shoulders drooped. That was how George knew he was right in assuming he was hiding something, and even now, Dream didn't want to admit it. But George wasn't going to push. This was a problem they could deal with after when everything was over.

"I just want to know that you're okay." Dream's voice sounded fragile. It annoyed George that he almost felt guilty for it.

George rubbed the side of his arm slowly. He just wanted to get out of the suffocating room. He felt on edge again, and he didn't want to have another episode in front of Dream. "I am. I'd tell you if I wasn't."

"Would you?"

At Dream's intense gaze, George opted for turning away.

You're stronger than you think, the shadow told him. He doesn't see that.

"I'll be fine," he said as he made his way to the door, walking out without saying another word. He spent some time breathing in the air outside away from his friends. Sapnap checked on him once, but George did nothing besides nod when he asked him if he was alright.

At almost midnight, he returned to their room where the lights were all off and everyone was asleep. He slipped under the covers quietly and buried his face into the pillow, hoping his nightmares didn't haunt him this time.

They didn't. Almost half an hour after he had gotten comfortable and closed his eyes, waiting for sleep to overtake him, Dream scooted closer—so close his breath tickled George's neck. Almost

cautiously, as if he didn't want to wake George, Dream slipped his arm over his back, his fingers squeezing his side a little. He sighed comfortably against George's hair.

And shortly after, George lost himself to white dreams.

The drive to Denver was boring.

George finished his book halfway through and had to listen to Sapnap's crappy taste in music for half the time during his turn on the wheel. They ate in the car again, preferring to stop only for gas to get to Denver as fast as they could.

When they arrived, they dropped their stuff at the hotel room they booked earlier and drove to a nearby shopping center where they split off to buy supplies: Sapnap and George to the grocery store and Skeppy and Dream to the dollar store right beside it.

Surprisingly, he was doing a lot better than yesterday. As they roamed the hallways, picking out the cheapest and easiest snacks to eat and throwing them into the basket Sapnap was carrying, George felt at ease.

The store was somewhat calm, low radio music playing in the background and creaky shopping cart wheel sounds coming from several hallways ahead. As they stood in the chip aisle and Sapnap blabbered on about which brands were better (Dream had told them they could only get one bag), George took a look around.

A woman cradling a baby while she screamed at her twin daughters giggling and chasing each other around a shopping cart. An older employee on a high ladder stacking the cookie shelves as he seemingly contemplated his life. A group of teenage girls filming what seemed to be a challenge video at the end of the hallway.

The woman shouted at the little girls as they moved on from the cart to run around the ladder. It rattled slightly and made the employee curse out as he gripped the top shelf to steady himself.

Setting her baby in the shopping car, the woman profusely apologized as she took her daughters' wrists and pulled them back. Behind the cart, the girls were screaming and laughing. The girl holding the camera backed up toward the baby in the shopping cart. She bumped into it but caught herself from falling by clutching one of the shelves. The cart rolled forward and the corner of it hit the shelves, making a few of the salsa bottles on the ledge above the baby shake.

The mother turned her back to the cart and shouted at the twins. One of the girls gripped the side of the cart and made it hit the shelf again. George witnessed as the glass bottle toppled over the ledge straight toward the baby.

It never reached it. It stopped nearly a few centimeters above it, levitating upward and slowly returning to its place.

George released the breath he didn't realize he'd been holding as he prevented the accident from happening right in front of his eyes.

Nobody noticed.

The woman finished scolding her daughters and pushed the cart down the aisle, passing right behind them. The girls were still happily filming, and the employee had just climbed down from the ladder and was pushing it toward another area.

As his breathing returned to normal, George turned back to Sapnap. But within a second of doing so, his vision blurred and he felt woozy, had to hold onto a shelf to prevent himself from falling.

“You okay, George?” Sapnap raised an eyebrow. “Drink something funny?” He snickered.

George opened his mouth to respond, but when he blinked, he saw a flash of white take over his vision, and he gasped as distant images rotated through his head, an overwhelming sense of dread hitting him at full force.

The headmaster slamming a stack of files on his desk. His mother’s worried expression as she spoke to him. Sarah beside them directing them a few words—words he couldn’t hear but that he somehow understood.

We presume they’re somewhere in the country looking for their friend.

How could you let this happen?

He was on edge before he left. I fear his powers are at risk of—

“George.”

His vision returned to normal and he was staring at Sapnap who was shaking his shoulders.

“My parents,” he said. His legs failed him, but Sapnap managed to catch him, setting him on the bottom of the shelf to sit for a moment.

Sapnap knelt beside him. “What’s going on? Are you okay?”

“At AGE. They know. They’re—” He had to stop talking from how dry his mouth was getting and only then did he realize he was panting like he had just finished a marathon.

“You’re not making any sense George. Just breathe and try to calm down.” Sapnap rubbed his shoulders lightly.

“Is he okay?” A woman he hadn’t noticed was standing beside Sapnap, looking down at George with worry. “Do you need me to dial an ambulance?”

“It’s okay, ma’am. There’s no need,” Sapnap told her without taking his eyes off George.

George tried to move Sapnap’s hands and insist he was fine, but he had no strength and his words came out as an incoherent mumble. His vision flashed white again, and the shelves beside them began to tremble, knocking over all the chip bags. The girls taking the video screamed, and the woman jerked back in shock.

Sapnap’s mouth was moving but George’s hearing had faded away, replaced by a faint ringing and the distant echo of a ticking clock. His vision was coming through in flashes like he was taking pictures with his eyes. Sapnap’s expression was progressively growing more troubled, and behind him, George could see the girl’s camera pointed at them. The woman was shouting into her phone. The salsa bottles that had been on the shelf a few seconds ago were shattered all over the ground. There were boxes of cookies and chip bags flying around. A tornado was beginning to form, and they were sitting at the eye of it.

Sapnap was mouthing his name, shaking his shoulders like it would bring him back, but slowly, the world was growing more distant, and George felt like his body wasn’t his own anymore, like something was pushing him away from reality. He could see his arms moving, pushing Sapnap

back who only stared at him in shock.

An impending doom rose in his chest, and he tried to pull his own body back, but it wasn't working. The fear in Sapnap's eyes was what broke him, what made him shut his eyes tight and fight this strange energy attempting to take over. When he opened them again, his vision was white.

Stop it, he told himself. *Get out of my head.*

The energy refused to back down. The only emotion clouding his mind was pure, unadulterated fear. Of his parents finding out he had escaped. Of AGE deciding on the consequences of their actions. Of where Bad could be and what they could be doing to him. Of the world as it spun around him.

Stop it.

And then everything went black.

He awoke to the sound of distant, muffled voices, slowly coming into focus.

"I think he had another attack back in Kansas. The bathroom mirror was cracked and I could tell he was hiding something. He's been really closed off these past few days."

"How long do you think it's been going on?"

"Since we got to Florida. He was acting off. That first morning at my parent's house, I woke up because something felt wrong and when I knocked on his door, he looked dead."

"I remember. I think he's been having nightmares, but he hasn't told me what they're about."

"I'm worried about him, Sap."

A pause.

"That night you fought, he told me he was scared of hurting us. I told him he wasn't capable of it because he loves us too much... but what happened at the market..."

Silence.

"That wasn't George."

Slowly, he regained his sense of touch, and he could feel the pillowy comforter below him. Beside him, he felt the bed dip and the rough texture of familiar fingers grazed his hand.

Dream's voice was closer this time, despite being barely above a whisper. "This is why I was so hesitant to do this... What if we made the wrong decision?"

It took Sapnap a second to respond. "There's no choice but going forward. We can't turn back time."

"I know but... what happens if his powers get worse? What are we going to do? If something happens and we get caught and George gets taken away because he's an adult and not even a citizen and he's a Psychic above all that, I'd—" His voice cracked. "I'd never forgive myself for it."

He heard footsteps and the covers by his feet sunk.

“Let’s not worry about that now, Dream. You’ll give off bad energy, and it’ll just make things worse for him. The quicker we get this mission over with, the better it’ll turn out for us.”

Dream sighed. “You’re right.”

Slowly, George blinked his eyes open, first noticing the side of Dream’s face, the way his fingers were resting above the hand that he was starting to regain sensation in.

When Dream noticed his eyes were open, his face brightened, and he exclaimed, “George. You’re awake.”

George attempted to sit up, but his arms failed to properly support him, and he ended up sinking further into the sheets.

“Hey, hey, hey.” Dream scooted closer, the tenderness in his voice making George’s chest warm.

“Be careful. I don’t want you to pass out on me again.” Leaning forward, Dream pressed his hands around his waist and helped him sit against the plush bed frame. His chuckle reverberated on his body before he pulled back. George’s mouth dried up.

“I’ll go get you some water from the car,” Sapnap replied with a knowing smile before heading out of the room, leaving them alone with the quiet rumble of the air conditioner.

Dream was smiling at him. The fondness drowning his aura caused George’s chest to tickle.

“You have a dumb smile,” was the first thing George said. His voice was hoarse and weak.

Dream’s tea kettle wheezes brightened up the atmosphere, and George managed a smile. Dream’s beam only grew wider as he regained his breath and watched him, the familiar eye twinkle that always left George weak-kneed present.

“How are you feeling?”

“Like I just got hit by a bus.”

Shaking his head, Dream chuckled again. “You almost gave me a heart attack when Sapnap walked out of the store carrying your unconscious body. I thought someone had hurt you.”

It did. George barely contained the words, and instead offered a weak shrug.

“What happened back there?” Dream asked.

George sighed when he realized there was no way he could ignore the topic now. “I don’t know. I think I lost control of my powers and…” He furrowed his eyebrows, trying to remember exactly what happened but finding his memory of the event was fuzzy. “I think I saw visions.”

Dream was staring at him, deep in thought. He thought he was going to ask him about them, but instead, he said, “Sapnap said your telekinesis went haywire and that your eyes were flashing white. He said you were speaking gibberish and that it lasted like a minute before you just passed out.”

“It felt much longer than that,” he muttered, and his hand found comfort in rubbing the gem hanging from his neck.

It went quiet—a tense and charged silence that bothered George. It felt like Dream had a lot to say, but he was holding back for him. He appreciated the effort. He wasn't quite sure he could handle knowing all the details or recounting the whole experience.

"I had something similar back at the motel," he found himself saying instead. He didn't know why he said it. Maybe he was tired of the secrets weighing them both down—this unyielding force keeping them at a distance even when they lied against each other at night.

"Why didn't you tell me?" His tone wasn't angry but instead disappointed. It hurt George to hear it coming from him.

"I was still trying to figure it out myself," George quietly admitted, lowering his gaze. "I didn't want to be a distraction."

Dream stared at him, his fingers brushing his chin and raising it slowly. His finger drew light circles at the side of his jaw, and he leaned closer, his voice barely a murmur. It sent chills down his neck.

"I was worried about you."

George stared at him, frozen to his spot, only watching him lean closer and closer. His breath grazed his skin and it felt like fire. Everything within George was telling him to pull back. That his mind was playing tricks on him. That Dream couldn't possibly mean it in any way that wasn't platonic.

"I don't know what I'd do if I lost you," he whispered.

George's eyes traced down to his lips and Dream's did the same. He could almost hear the silent plea behind his gaze.

Then someone burst through the door, causing them to jump away from each other.

"Skeppy?" Dream asked with a mix of surprise and irritation.

Sapnap followed behind him after shutting the door, exclaiming, "I tried to stop him," as if he knew something would happen between them. It made George's face feel hot.

Without an explanation, Skeppy rushed to the control by the television and sat at the foot of the bed, frantically turning it on and searching the channels.

Dream approached him. "What are you doing?"

He stopped scrolling the list until he reached a news channel that seemed to be coming back from a commercial break.

"In other news, today afternoon, a video was captured in Denver of a Psychic inexplicably destroying a grocery store. The footage was filmed by a group of teenage girls who were recording a video nearby."

His heart dropped when the screen transitioned. It was a video of him and Sapnap at the grocery store. Sapnap's back was to the camera as he attempted to calm him down. Items from the shelves were being sucked into the swirl of flying objects around them and being released in every direction. The camera shook and moved all over, unfocusing the image as the girls shouted and backed away. By some miracle, their faces were mostly obscured seeing as Sapnap was blocking him and George had his head pointed down.

“Shit,” Sapnap muttered beside him.

“Authorities have reason to believe these could be the fugitive EMs who snuck into the country via a cruise that landed in Miami. The Psychic in question was wearing a red hoodie, blue jeans, and had brown hair. His accomplice had a white hoodie, black pants, and black hair. Their identities have not yet been confirmed. If you have any information that could be of use on this national search, please contact the number below.”

“We need to get out of here,” Dream replied as he began to gather all their belongings.

“Where are we going to sleep?” said Sapnap.

“We can take turns on the road. It’s too risky to stay here now. Someone’s bound to recognize us.”

A knock at the door caused everyone to freeze. Dread hit him like a freight train as he looked toward it. Swaying his legs over the side, he carefully pulled himself up. Dream dropped the items on his arms and helped George to the restroom that Sapnap had opened so they could hide inside.

Skeppy made his way toward the door, turning to make sure Sapnap and George were out of sight before Dream gave him the go-ahead.

George stopped breathing when he heard the door open.

“Good afternoon,” a man spoke.

“Officer,” Skeppy simply stated, smooth and charismatically and without a hint of worry in his tone despite his aura indicating otherwise. “What brings you two gentlemen here on this beautiful evening?”

“We have reason to believe two EM fugitives were seen entering this hotel. We’d just like to take a look around if you don’t mind.”

“Do you have a warrant?” Dream spoke, more dryly than Skeppy.

For a second, it was silent. Sapnap shifted beside him, his nervous energy drowning the room. George choked up.

“It’s a very quick search. You won’t get into any trouble unless you’re hiding something.”

“I understand that, but we won’t let you in unless you have a warrant. I’m sure you understand where we’re coming from.”

The officer chuckled, muttering something inaudible to someone else, presumably his partner. A minute went by until the officer spoke again.

“Here’s your warrant. Now if you excuse us. We’d like to take a look around.”

Having nothing else to argue, Dream stopped talking. The door creaked open and slow footsteps entered the room. George’s heart beat faster and faster and he had to cover his mouth to quiet down his harsh breathing. Behind the shower curtains next to him, Sapnap stared at George, silently asking him what they were going to do.

A set of footsteps grew closer and closer, turning on the bathroom lights before pausing right at the door frame. They continued. George could physically feel the aura of a stranger pressing against his chest the closer he got. And then he stopped. Right in front of the curtain.

Everything stopped.

George's breath hitched when he saw a hand sneak around and grab the end of the only barrier concealing them, the breathing of the stranger on the other side of the thin curtain loud and heavy.

The curtain flew open, revealing Sapnap and George huddled behind it with a deer-in-the-headlights expression.

Heart beating and adrenaline pumping, George felt an unfamiliar energy wash over him as he locked eyes with the man. At that second, his senses faded away and all he could focus on was the aura circulating the man.

Confusion, surprise, fear, courage, determination—they funneled into George all at once. And like second nature, something inside him took over, swallowed the emotions and melded them like clay.

The man halted, firm and unmoving, his eyes milky and distant like he was stuck in a haze. And as suddenly as he fell into this state of hypnosis, he returned, his eyes gaining saturation and abruptly stepping back and turning away, movements unnatural and robotic. He turned off the lights, stepped out of the room, and informed his partner and their friends that they were done here.

Once the door closed, Sapnap turned to George and exclaimed, "What the fuck did you do to him?"

"I don't know!"

"What happened?" Dream burst through the door, a mix of worry and confusion on his expression.

"George hypnotized the man or something. He saw us but he just sorta went zombie mode for a second and then just left!"

The questioning look Dream sent him made his throat close up. George could tell he wanted to ask him about it, but he was afraid it would only be another trigger for him. Truthfully, George wouldn't have been able to explain it even if he tried. It felt like his powers were taking a life of their own—like they were trying to expel George out of his own body. Just knowing they could now act on pure instinct without George even thinking about it terrified him. It made him feel like a naive little boy again trapped inside a stranger's body.

"We should really head out. They could come back at any moment," Skeppy suggested when he poked his head inside.

Taking a deep breath, Dream sent George one last look before turning around and helping Skeppy gather all their stuff. With apprehension, George exchanged one last look with Sapnap before hurrying out of the room. His hands trembled the whole way to the car.

His sleep was dreamless.

He faded in and out of it throughout most of the ride, his mind awake but his body immobilized. He blinked his eyes open every so often—took in his surroundings.

Dream in the driver's seat lost in thought, his hands clutching the steering wheel as if he would tear it off at any moment. Sapnap's tight lips and furrowed eyebrows reflected on the side-view mirror by the passenger seat. The starry black sky out the window swallowing the moon whole and the wheat fields drowning the earth offering no signs of civilization.

He blinked and suddenly the sky was awake and this time, it was Dream in the passenger seat, looking out with an unrecognizable aura about him. It made George want to reach out his hand and caress his cheek, offering a comforting touch that was rare of him. Except he couldn't move his arms.

Hearing himself sigh drowsily, he blinked his eyes closed again, darkness overtaking his vision, the cold murmur of a distant voice calling for him. And a grandfather clock. Echoing. Counting down the seconds. One. By. One.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick—

“George?”

He awoke to Dream's murmur tickling in his ear. The first thing he noticed when he blinked his eyes open was Dream's face standing so close to him, his sun-kissed skin shining in the light of day and his plush, pink bottom lip glinting with white tiny twinkles like he had just licked it.

“Dream?”

“Morning, sleeping beauty.” He showed him that stupid grin that George just wanted to slap off his face. If only he had the strength in his still half-sleep arms.

“Idiot.” His voice cracked, and the unpleasant taste on his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. Gaining strength on his muscles, he managed to push himself up on the leather seat. “How long did I sleep?”

“Almost a day. We're in Wyoming.”

“A day?” He furrowed his eyebrows.

“You looked really tired. We didn't want to wake you, but I figured you needed to eat something. You didn't have dinner yesterday or breakfast this morning.”

George finally took a look at his surroundings, spotting the small, modern diner they were parked in front of. There were a few establishments scattered around the streets, but mostly, it was solely grasslands spanning for miles.

“Skeppy and Sapnap went to get us a table.”

“Should we really be in public right now?”

Dream's smile grew, and he pulled out a beanie from his hoodie pocket. “Put this on and take off the hoodie.”

“At least take me out to dinner first,” George muttered as he grabbed the bottom of his hoodie and pulled it off. He felt his shirt ride up below it, and he quickly pulled it down, feeling a little flustered with Dream's stare despite having already seen each other shirtless plenty of times in their years of knowing each other.

“Maybe not dinner, but what about lunch? I'll even pay.”

George huffed, rolling his eyes and getting off the truck. He slipped on the beanie and nodded toward the building.

It was a small and cozy diner, fairly empty and calm. There were only two waitresses on service,

one who was taking the order of an old couple in the back. Two men were sitting at the bar drinking and watching a rerun of an American football match.

Sapnap and Skeppy were sitting in a booth nearby. Dream slid in next to Sapnap while George sat by Skeppy.

“What’s on the menu? I’m starving,” Dream stated while rubbing his palms together.

“Yeah, you eat like a pig,” Sapnap muttered as he slid the menu across the table.

Raising both eyebrows and offering a crooked smirk, he took the menu and opened it. “At least I have an excuse for it. What’s yours?”

One of the waitresses, a pretty and short brunette with a kind smile, approached their table.

“Hello! Welcome to Graham’s. My name’s Alice and I’ll be serving you today. Are you ready to order?”

They ordered water accompanied by some of the cheaper meals on the menu seeing as they were running low on money. Closing her notepad, Alice remained beside the table for a second watching George.

“You look really familiar. Have we met before?”

His heart nearly stopped and he exchanged a panicked look with Dream before glancing at her again. “Um, I don’t believe so.”

Raising both eyebrows, she tilted her head and smiled. “Oh, you’re British? What a cute accent.”

“Thanks…”

“I’ll be right out with your orders soon.” She flashed George one last smile before walking off.

“Well look at that, our little Georgie’s got game.” Sapnap blew out a low whistle as he leaned back on his spot and grinned.

“Huh?”

“Dude, she was totally flirting with you,” Skeppy added with a snort.

“No she wasn’t,” George murmured, feeling his face get a little warm.

“She definitely was,” Dream said, clearing his throat right after. Admittedly, George found it amusing the way he was avoiding looking straight at him.

Before he could say anything, Alice returned with their drinks, placing them all in front of them and then smiling at George once more before walking off.

At the sight of Sapnap wiggling his eyebrows, George scoffed and took a sip of his water. “Shut up.”

Eventually, Alice brought them their food, and George purposefully avoided eye contact. He chose instead to stare at Dream from across the table who snickered and sent him a teasing wink. George huffed and started digging into his pancakes, now realizing how hungry he was. He took a look around the room as Sapnap and Dream launched into an argument about whether waffles or pancakes were superior.

The men who had been sitting at the bar were gone now, leaving only the bartender who was swiping down the counter. As he finished up, he grabbed the remote and changed the channel, leaving it on a popular live talk show called *Tim & Tina Talks* with a man and a woman sitting on a modern living-room set. He turned up the volume, and George's heart dropped when he caught on to their discussion.

“— if there is a possibility that these fugitives are terrorists, the government isn't taking this situation as seriously as it should be. This is a matter of national security. We already deal with vigilante EM groups every day like the Bergman Defenders who target companies they disagree with and destroy city property meant for helping its residents. All for what? To make a statement about the lack of protective EM legislation? To companies who don't have the power to change this? They're just making everything worse for innocent EMs.”

“Tim, I think you're misunderstanding the reasoning behind Empower activist groups. They're—”

“What the Bergman Defenders do isn't activism. It's terrorism! Empower began as a valiant, peaceful movement set toward protecting EM rights. Using it to describe these sort of organized crime groups is an abomination.”

“They're certainly not going about it the right way, and I don't agree with their actions. However, the beginning stages of the Empower movement proved to be ineffective. The Bergman Bombing was the turning point that pushed the movement from its pacifist route to more active acts. The inability for the government to listen to these injustices taking place all over the country, all over the world even, is what pushed these groups into existence. They're only doing what they believe is the only way to change things.”

“Then what do you say about these EM fugitives? Do you think they're doing what they think is right too? Breaking into the country through a cruise ship? At this point, we can't even trust our travel agencies to keep us safe.”

“What I'm saying is we can't assume anybody's motive. These Ems could very well be asylum seekers from a South American country. Some of the witnesses in the cruise say the Psychic in question, the one believed to have been spotted in Denver, saved a child from falling out of the ship. If they were really set on harming people, why would they save a kid?”

“Well, I don't know Tina, maybe they have some sort of messed up agenda to gain the love of the public. Young people already have hashtags in support of them circulating social media like they're some sort of misunderstood group of heroes.”

“Hold on, Tim, the show producer just messaged me here saying they have an important breaking news report. Apparently, the identities of the four stowaways have finally been released. It appears to be four students from one of the most well-known Extramundane institutions in the world. Their names and faces are being shown on screen right now. Looks like, George, the Psychic with them is a British citizen.”

The room caved in around George. He felt unable to breath as he stared at the school book pictures of them and their names now being displayed on national TV. Beside him, his friends had quieted down and were now intently listening to the report as well and cursing to themselves.

“We're receiving an incoming call from the headmaster of AGE. We'll put him on right now.” The screen behind them switched from a screensaver into a video call at the headmaster's office.

“Jay O'Connor, current headmaster of AGE, is live with us with an official statement about the situation. What do you have to say about this, O'Connor?”

“Hi Tim and Tina. It’s unfortunate these are the circumstances we’re meeting in. It’s true four of our students snuck out of the island a few days ago through undetermined means. We can’t fully disclose all the information, however, we do have here George’s parents who would like to send a message to him wherever him and his classmates may be.”

His knuckles were white on the table, and he felt Dream’s hand rest above one. He gulped when he watched the camera shift from the headmaster to his parents sitting in his office. There were tear stains on his mother’s cheeks and his father was tensely sitting up straight with a blank stare.

His mother started talking, in between the tears, voice desperate and cracked and like it would shatter at any given second.

“George, if you’re listening, please, honey. They’re giving you a chance to come back with no consequences. Don’t do anything you’ll end up regretting. We love you so much.”

His father leaned forward with his eyebrows furrowed and he gripped his mother’s hand on the desk. George’s hand wrapped around the crystal hanging on his neck.

“We know you’re struggling, George, and it’s not your fault. You’re only going to hurt yourself and everyone around you if you don’t turn yourself in. We just want to help you.”

Inside his clenched fist, George clutched the crystal so tight it dug into his skin.

“Everything’s going to be alright, George. You’re strong. We can get through this together.” His eyes turned glassy, and his gaze bore into George through the TV screen. *“Please, come back to us.”*

Chapter End Notes

Two chapters left until the next hiatus (it will probably end up being longer than a week because I've been so caught up with school but most likely not as long as the last) and plenty of huge announcements to come so stay tuned! Also I might be taking a few more polls on twitter about the story/update schedule/etc so follow if you want to vote on those :))

If you haven't yet, [check out this wonderful fan art based on chapter 10 by @cyslmee on twitter](#)! Literally made my whole week, thank you! :))

Also, I agree, the song The National - Demons really fits George's internal conflict very well!

Con mucha emoción,

Light <3

[tumblr](#) & [twitter](#)

Chapter notes (per request on twitter)

- I literally forgot Missouri existed so that's why it's only like a paragraph long, I'm so sorry Missourians D:
- Hm, I wonder how big of a turning point Nashville was for dnf...

- Do y'all think they'll be able to save Bad? And if they do, what will the consequences of it be?
- George can fly??? :O
- "Keeping some very important information about my mental stability to myself" trope check, sorry y'all, it's too relatable not to add
- Cuddling in bed counter: 2 (probably 3 since they did sleep at the hotel in Nashville together so...)
- The grocery bit with the baby in the shopping cart was a little tense, huh?
- Not George having an episode in the middle of a grocery store while people are watching...
- Also, George can see the future/ashes of the present??? :O
- Kiss being interrupted trope, check, I did say this was a slow burn, did I not? aha :))
- So George can hypnotize people now... hm, I don't remember that being a common Psychic ability...
- So this grandfather clock, huh? Must be very important if it's so reoccurring
- Wow, we're in Wyoming already? Two states away from Seattle... I wonder what's going to happen next
- Damn it Tim, stop cutting Tina off smh
- What do y'all think about their little political talk show? Any interesting observations? :))
- Oh no...
- Welp, George's parents are back. The situation sure looks messy... I wonder what they're going to do now that the whole country knows who they are...

Campout in Idaho

Chapter Notes

Weekly thanks to Grav for their help <3

IMPORTANT: [Potential trigger warning disclaimer](#), might include **spoilers** for the ending of this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"We need to go." Dream's hand gripping his shoulder shook him out of his haze. He looked up with tears brimming at the corners of his eyes and realized Dream was staring behind him. When he turned, he saw Alice talking to another one of the workers and pointing at them as she spoke on the phone.

They rushed out of the diner and huddled into the truck. Dream hit the gas and drove off at full speed. As George looked behind them, he spotted two of the workers running out of the diner. One tried to snap a picture of the truck as it drove away, but Skeppy reached out of the moving window and sent a gust of wind flying their way that caused their phone to go flying into the road and crash down at full force. Then, when George spotted the camera outside that was pointed toward the parking lot, he used his telekinesis to lift a rock off the side of the road and smashed it.

They drove for hours. Even though Sapnap offered to take a turn at the wheel, Dream refused to stop. Nobody spoke as if even the quietest peep would give their location away.

Deciding it was too risky to stay at any hotels now that their names and faces were all over the news, they decided to camp out at a secluded area on the outskirts of a national park in Idaho. They parked the truck about a mile out behind a small hill that wasn't visible from the main road.

Although they didn't have many camping supplies, they did have plenty of blankets stored in the back, so they decided they would sleep in the truck. Sapnap set up a little fire by the forest so they could sit around it on some fallen logs.

It was quiet. They hadn't talked much besides giving basic instructions. When they finally sat down around the fire, George could hardly take the tension enclosing them.

It felt as if at any second, they would hear a helicopter approaching them, and they would have a dozen officers on their trail.

It didn't help the chill of his shadow pursuer had returned at full force, settling beside his ear with hushed murmurs asking him to test out his full potential—that he had the capacity to fix this whole mess.

George wasn't sure what it meant, so he refused.

"What are we supposed to do now?" Sapnap finally asked.

"We can't turn back," Skeppy murmured, playing around with two twigs and a beetle scrambling

around on the dirt.

“We’re not.” Dream plopped himself next to George after he finished heating up a sausage from a bag they had bought back in Nashville and stored in their cooler. “We’re one ride away from Seattle. It’s just a matter of disguising ourselves until we find where they’re keeping Bad.”

“How are we going to do that?” George muttered, knowing full well they hadn’t planned on what they would do once they reached Seattle. At this point, it felt like they would be endlessly running around like chickens with their heads cut off.

“We have a map of the old facility. Maybe we ask around?” Sapnap suggested.

“It’s too risky now. They’ll recognize us.” Dream’s eyes landed on George, and he could tell Dream wanted to say something but he seemed to think better of it. He turned away, and George restrained himself from asking about it.

“We’ll do some research. Maybe look through some local libraries to see if we can find anything. Let’s just... take a breather right now,” he said while poking the fire with a stick.

The flames crackled in the forest ambient and masked the insect chirps and whistling wind. Dull oranges and vivid yellows danced to the breeze, rising and falling, crunching and fizzing, slowly brightening their surroundings as the evening reds cloaked around them.

Despite the heat emanating from the fire, George couldn’t help but hug himself, breathing out in between his dry lips and shivering when his own cold fingertips grazed his frigid skin. A lone owl hooted in the distance followed by a distant howling hundreds of miles away.

George’s vision fixated solely on the fire, focusing on the way the flames disintegrated the twigs and logs and left behind their charred bodies. Smoke and embers rose high, sparkled and died as they reached the treetops.

He blinked once and the image of the forest fire vanished.

And he saw red. Red everywhere.

A blank room covered in it, puddles on the floor and stains on the walls. Footprints and handprints marked on the walls.

There was a lone boy. His back was to George. He was tucked into a ball with his arms over his head. The sound of an oncoming freight train headed straight for him from every direction, as if at any second, a tornado would ravage his surroundings and yank him into a neverending windstorm of ashes and torment and destruction.

Let me out, a shadow whispered in his ear. He didn’t want to turn around, too afraid of what he’d see. And when he opened his eyes again, the sound broke with a snap.

He was in the forest staring at the fire again. If he concentrated hard enough, he could almost hear a rhythmic ticking masked behind the wailing inferno inside the flames.

Tick. Crack. Tock. Snap.

Tick. Crack. Tock. Snap.

Tick—

“— at the creek we saw on the way here before it gets darker.” Dream’s voice came into focus.

He stood up and glanced at George with a smile. Sapnap and Skeppy were already walking off.

“Coming?”

“To where?” George furrowed his eyebrows after snapping himself from his hazy state.

“We’re going for a swim.”

“Right now?”

“Yeah.” Dream offered his hand.

George stared at it questioningly before he took it. His warm grip felt safe. George didn’t want to let go once they started walking, and so he didn’t.

“How are you holding up?” Dream asked on the way there. Their clasped hands swung playfully in between.

George shrugged. “I’ll make it.”

When they finally reached the creek, Sapnap and Skeppy were already down to their underwear and jumping into the water. Skeppy used the wind to surf around in small vortexes above the water while Sapnap aimed fireballs at him, laughing and shouting out curses like they were just little kids having fun.

Dream had already shredded his clothes and thrown them over a branch by the time George turned to look at him. George kept his eyes above his shoulders despite having admired the sight of Dream like this more times than he would care to admit.

“You coming?” Dream gestured toward the water and stood above a little hill ready to jump in.

“It’s cold,” George muttered, standing awkwardly to the side.

Dream snorted and turned away from the ledge to face George. He approached him slowly with threatening hands. “Don’t be a baby.”

George stepped back and raised a warning finger, frowning and saying, “If you throw me in I will literally kill you.”

“Oh *come on*. Do you think that little of me?” Dream sent him a coy side-smirk and raised both arms in surrender. Then, he took another step forward.

“Dream, I’m serious. Don’t you dare take another step,” George warned, though the small smile forming on his expression betrayed him.

Dream’s aura was playful and full of mischief. It made George’s heart flutter and feel like he was back at AGE, messing around after classes and playing hide and seek in the library or manhunt in the forest just as the sun was beginning to set.

Dream started speaking. “I’m not going to do—” He reached George in the time it took him to blink once and flung him over his shoulder without care. George lost his breath, and a cackle escaped him.

“Dream! Let me go!” He slapped Dream’s back in between his laughter and swung his legs back

and forth to get him to release him.

And Dream did.

Though a second later, all George felt was a huge splash and the pressure of the water filling his ears and muffling his hearing when he was met with the full force of a body of water to the face.

He resurfaced, gasping out and blinking his eyes open a couple of times. Before he could curse him out, another splash burst next to him. Sapnap's and Skeppy's dumb laughing didn't help his annoyance, and he sent a full splatter of water to Sapnap's face to which he responded with a small fireball that he barely managed to dodge.

A hand underwater pulled him back in, and he kicked it away with a screech. Dream resurfaced next to him, water dripping from the strands of hair stuck to his forehead and sliding over his toothed grin.

"Why would you do that? I'm all wet now," George whined.

"That's what she said," Sapnap called from behind.

"Oh, shut up." George sent another splash his way.

Dream ducked his head in the water again without responding, and George shrieked, swimming away to escape him. He felt Dream graze his legs underwater and he let out another scream. Skeppy laughed and shouted that he sounded like a little girl.

They spent the rest of the evening like that—swimming and laughing and splashing and dodging until the stars reached the sky. George hadn't giggled that loud since they had left the island, and they all left the lake with big grins and argued about who had won their swimming race, their loud voices scaring all the critters away. They disqualified Dream due to unfair advantages and the blond only stuck out his tongue and claimed to be the clear winner.

George was freezing the whole way back to their little campsite seeing as Dream had thrown him in with all his clothes on. He whined for most of the walk until Dream finally gave in to taking off his hoodie and letting George put it on after he had shed off his wet clothing.

George hadn't asked for it, but he couldn't say he minded, especially with the way Dream's scent was practically branded into the cotton.

Skeppy gave some offhand comment about George looking like Dream's girlfriend, and George cracked a medium-sized branch above him that he barely managed to avoid with a gust of wind. That shut him right up.

The fire was gone by the time they arrived, and they put on a fresh set of clothing. (George chose to keep Dream's hoodie on and gave the excuse that it technically wasn't wet. Dream didn't even try to argue.)

Then they all settled themselves in the truck to sleep. Sapnap claimed the passenger seat which he reclined all the way back and Dream protested sleeping on the driver's one because he was too big to comfortably sleep by the steering wheel. Skeppy exchanged one glance with George and then Dream and then promptly decided he would take the seat instead.

Dream and George slept in the hood of the truck nestled inside a bunch of blankets. Dream's abnormally high body heat was enough to keep them both warm when the temperature dropped. They fell into an embrace under the stars without thinking twice about it as if they had done it all

their lives.

George couldn't help but melt into his arms and bury his head into his chest, laying an arm lazily over his waist.

When he heard Dream chuckle at the action, he muttered, "It's cold," as an excuse. Dream hummed in agreement. And even though they both knew that wasn't the reason, neither dared to admit it.

He pretended his chest didn't feel like it was at the verge of an explosion when he felt Dream bury his nose into his hair and inhale a deep breath. Then Dream gripped him tighter and hooked a leg over his to completely shield him.

It was only when they spent nights like these—their limbs and auras interlaced—that George truly took notice of how big Dream was in comparison to him. And despite Dream having endlessly teased him about his "shortness" (George wasn't short, Dream was just freakishly tall, he had always countered), neither had ever confessed how much they liked it.

George dozed off to Dream's fast-paced heart and calm breaths with a smile and an incomparable softness in his chest. And it was only then that he finally admitted to himself how badly he had fallen.

It wasn't that he hated dances.

It was more like the amount of people concentrated in one place had always been a stressor for him. He had dealt with it in the past, but after his empathy came around, it got progressively harder to hang around in loud, crowded places with all kinds of potent auras intermingling and making his mind feel woozy and out of focus.

*And so George was **not** looking forward to the Luna Azul Ball, especially as their archery instructor, a Bio-S prefect from Year 12, interrupted the end of class to give them the last run-through of the event and set some guidelines for their dress code.*

Although he desperately tried not to let it bother him, he couldn't help the spark of jealousy seething in his stomach when he watched the third girl of the day approach Dream to no doubt ask him if he had a date yet.

Bad took one look at him and Dream and then proceeded to offer George a gentle smile and a pat on the back.

"Don't worry. He won't accept."

George's jaw clenched, and he looked to the side. "How do you know?"

"Because your birthday falls on the day of. He wouldn't pay attention to anyone but you during the dance, silly."

Slipping his arrows into the quiver and setting it on the rack, George took a while to respond.

"I don't even think I'm gonna go."

"George! Luna Azul only happens every few years. You can't just miss it."

Bad trailed behind George as he went to pick up his stuff in the gazebo, passing by a couple of Geos in the party-planning committee who were blooming Love-in-a-Mist and other flowers and arranging them into decorations for the event.

George gripped his backpack and swung it over his shoulder. He sent Bad a blank stare. He clicked his tongue and pretended to think about it.

“It’s really not that serious.”

Watching his friend’s face fall certainly incited a bit of guilt in him, but George couldn’t help but think of all the lovey-dovey couples who would be grinding on each other or sneaking out into the forest in a fit of giggles—leaving the air hot and thick with suffocating passion and lust. Or the shady students who would no doubt sneak in alcohol they snatched from the reserves and curious Bio-E’s hiding behind the stage to “ask for Alex.” Or the hyper energy from all the intermingled thrilled and eager auras that would drown the beach and give him a headache all night long.

He had barely managed to get through the Frosted Formal without passing out from all the auras swamping him the first year he had discovered his empathy, not to mention all the noisy and rowdy events and games during New AGE and Legacy Week every year after that.

*He didn’t want to deal with yet another week-long headache from a stupid dance he wouldn’t even enjoy. **Especiall**y if Dream did decide to go with Samantha who had been insistent on wooing him ever since he broke up with Tala the past semester and George would be forced to watch them flirt with each other the whole night.*

On his birthday of all days.

George cringed, and he didn’t realize he missed a step while walking out of the gazebo until he was plummeting to the ground about to land flat on his face. Yet the gentle cradle of familiar arms caught him.

“Woah, you good?” Dream asked while George steadied himself. Then he pushed him away and muttered that he was fine.

“Dream. Tell George that he can’t miss Luna Azul this year,” Bad said.

Dream frowned, and he locked eyes with George who was quick to look away. “You don’t want to go to Luna Azul? Why?”

“Too many people.”

“George!” Dream stepped in front of him, suddenly reminding George that his best friend had no definition of personal space. “I thought we’d be dates. You know? So we can dance for hours and kiss at the end of the night?” His smile was teasing and crooked and so annoying that George was tempted to punch him.

He scoffed instead and walked around him to head to his dorm building.

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Oh, come on.” Dream hurriedly caught up to him after waving goodbye to Bad who stayed back to talk to their archery instructor. “Why wouldn’t you want to be my date?”

George’s stomach turned.

“The question is who would want to be your date? You’re smelly and hyper and annoying.”

Dream laughed, getting in front of him and walking backward as he replied, “Oh please, I know you’ve seen all the girls asking me out.”

George rolled his eyes. “That’s only because you won the championship last year. You didn’t have anyone batting an eye on you before that.”

Releasing an exaggerated gasp, Dream raised an offended hand to his heart. “You wound me, Georgie.”

He swiftly turned just as they reached the steps to the dorm building and hurried to open the door for George. Then he gave an extravagant bow and gestured for him to walk inside.

George huffed and stepped inside without thanking him. They passed by one of his prefects, Miranda, in the lobby who waved hello and didn’t blink at the fact Dream was inside the Psychic dorms without a pass or explicit permission. At this point, none of the prefects who knew them scolded them anymore seeing as they had been handed enough detentions it was practically just another hangout spot for them now.

Heading into the elevator, Dream said, “But seriously. Why don’t you want to go? You don’t even know if you’ll still be here the next time it comes around.”

George chewed on the inside of his mouth and pressed the button to the third floor.

“I told you. There’s gonna be too many people. Too much noise. It’s just not worth it.”

“Not worth it? What about the DJ? The special guest performance they’ll be having? The light show? The food stands? The rides they’re installing?” Dream continued to list everything while they made their way down the hall to George’s door.

“The—”

“I get it, Dream. It’s going to be fun, but not for me. Do you know how tiring it’s going to be blocking everyone out?” George told him while he unlocked the door. Once inside, he threw his backpack next to his bed and slumped down on his rolling chair. Dream chose to jump onto George’s bed and lay on his side. He gave George the puppy-dog stare he hated because he always got his way with it.

“I’ll help with that. You can just focus on me.”

“You know it’s hard when there’s a crowd around. Especially at a party.”

“Georgeeeee,” Dream pleaded, his begging face intensifying.

George opted to turn his back to him and turn on his computer.

“It’s your birthday. You can’t just stay in!”

“I can.”

His bedsprings squeaked behind him, and he heard Dream’s footsteps approaching. Without a warning, Dream turned his chair to face him. George was about to groan in irritation, but instead, a quiet gasp escaped him when he realized Dream’s face was barely a breath away.

“Please? It doesn’t have to be long, but we can’t just miss it.”

Hearing Dream talk like they were attached at the hip made his stomach churn.

“You don’t have to miss it.”

“I won’t leave you alone for your birthday.”

George bit the inside of his mouth as he stared at Dream whose pleading face was starting to get to him. Then, Dream’s eyes glanced at his lips for the briefest moment. Groaning, George turned away to put distance in between them and give him space to breathe.

Dream whined faintly like a puppy who hadn’t received his treat.

“Fine. One hour. But then we leave.”

“Yes,” Dream exclaimed and raised both arms in the air.

George just hoped he wouldn’t regret his decision.

The Friday of Luna Azul arrived faster than he would’ve liked. The week flew by with the same routine: waking up, breakfast, getting through the school day, talking to Sarah, calling his parents, hanging out with his friends in the library, eating dinner, and going back to bed, sometimes in different orders.

Regardless, the day of, George’s stomach was swirling with nausea, both from his own anxiety and the aura of excited nerves pricking the air in every corner of the school.

Although he had already decided on a pair of simple slacks and an old button-down buried in the dark crevices of his closet, he made the mistake of telling his mother about it a few days prior, and she instantly disapproved of the outfit, claiming she would be sending him a proper suit through priority shipping. George had hoped it didn’t arrive in time, but unfortunately, it did.

Surprisingly enough, the outfit wasn’t as bad as he thought it would be. It was a dark navy suit with a pastel blue vest, white button-down, and some simple dark brown dress shoes. He found a hand-written note inside the garment bag that read ‘Wear with the top button unbuttoned!’ and he chuckled when he remembered his mother’s persistent voice.

He couldn’t help the spark of confidence that hit him when he looked in the mirror and realized he looked good. Like actually good.

After spending a good thirty minutes ruffling his hair until it looked somewhat okay, George shot Dream a text that he was on his way to the main entrance of the Psychic dorm where they had decided to meet and headed out of his room.

He shuffled past long, flowy gowns and expensive, luxurious suits and couples littering the lobby snapping pictures. When he got outside, he spotted Dream at the bottom of the steps with his arms crossed and tapping his foot restlessly while glancing around the campus.

“Dream,” he called out, and he had to keep himself from tripping over himself when his friend turned.

To put it simply—Dream’s nickname was a perfect description of his appearance. Suddenly, George understood why everyone had been sneaking glances while they passed (even a few of the couples were ogling).

He was in a dark green suit with a white button-up that was lined down in a 'V,' showing off his neck and part of his chest. His hair was slicked and parted back to the side in a relaxed yet formal manner.

"George."

Dream's crooked smile made his stomach feel like it was doing acrobatics.

He swallowed and tried to think of the time he had seen his grandma in a swimsuit at the beach when he was five years old to diminish the improper thoughts coming to mind that would undoubtedly slip out and that Dream would catch. His knees almost failed him when he noticed the way Dream took him in and then locked eyes with him, a spark of playfulness abound.

"You look good in a suit."

"Thanks, Dream..." he murmured, pursing his lips and feeling his face grow slightly hot.

"You're welcome."

His smile grew wider when he noticed George's faint blush. His body froze up when he reached the bottom step, and Dream didn't hesitate to pull him into an unexpected tight and warm embrace.

"Happy birthday," he whispered into his ear like it was a secret, practically setting George on fire.

Think Grandma thoughts. Think Grandma thoughts. Think Grandma thoughts.

George cleared his throat and pulled away when Dream loosened his grasp and glanced away.

"Thanks." George's voice was barely there. "Let's go before I regret this."

They followed the line of students heading toward the beach alongside each other. George grew tenser as they approached, the sound of lively music being heard from half a mile away.

When the party came to vision behind the palm trees, he could hardly believe how different the place looked.

At the entrance, the patch of grass at the edge of the beach with an arc of bushes and palm trees surrounding it was now decorated with hundreds of Love-in-a-Mist's and glowing flower arrangements. The deck beside it had a dance floor set up right in front of the DJ who was already blasting music, confetti and smoke into the crowd of teenagers dancing.

There were a dozen or so food vendors lined up in the beach below along with carnival games and other activities. There was even a small traveling Ferris wheel. The sound of laughter and shouting and music drowned their surroundings along with the scent of sweets and salty foods. Waves of joy and fun also took to the air, hitting George from every direction and making his whole body feel like it was buzzing with electricity.

The main attraction, however, was the breathtaking full moon in the sky—a glistening glow ball raining beams of blue upon them. The picture booth was set up in the perfect position for the moon to be front and center in the pictures the professional photographer was taking of the students walking in.

"What did I tell you?"

George noticed Dream's coy smile beside him and closed his mouth quickly, scoffing and replying, "Let's just go get our photo. One hour, and then I'll leave."

It didn't end up being an hour.

In fact, George lost track of time almost instantly after they stepped inside. They met up with Sapnap and some random girl who he had somehow convinced to be his date and spent some time on the dance floor. At first, George had wanted to stay behind, embarrassed that he didn't exactly know how to dance. However, through pleading eyes and countless insistence, Dream convinced him he wouldn't make a fool of himself and that he would lead him on the dance.

George tried to dance, but his movements ended up being jaggy and tense. Upon seeing Dream's laughing smile, he got absurdly red and tried to walk off, but Dream just pulled him back, close enough that he could talk into his ear in the middle of all the ruckus. It only added to the color on his face.

"Just let the music guide you. You remember all those times we went swimming at the shoreline? You know how sometimes you float on your back and let the waves guide you? Pretend you're there right now."

Dream took his hands and swayed to the beat of the relaxed Caribbean music playing over the speakers. "Pretend it's the ocean guiding you."

George followed along, loosening his body and letting the rhythm take over.

"There you go." Dream smiled from ear to ear, and George smiled too, growing more confident with his movements. George found himself getting lost in Dream's eyes as they danced, the emotions around him fading and only one bright aura shining around him.

Eventually, Sapnap appeared out of nowhere and took George by the hand, twirling him unexpectedly and laughing hysterically when George yelled, "Sapnap."

The music changed, and it was their sign to finally get out the dance floor. They found Skeppy and Bad at the food vendors. Bad was apparently supervising Skeppy while he overloaded his mouth with junk food. They walked through the stands trying foods and even getting on the Ferris wheel at one point and watching the moon. George couldn't stop smiling the whole time.

It wasn't until near the end of the night when they were sitting at the benches by the food stands that they heard shouting nearby. Curious, they all headed over to investigate and found a fight had broken out and there was a circle of students around the two offenders—two shifters, one a puma and another a gorilla, who were in their animal form, their garments shredded around them from where they had shifted.

"Is that Jessie?" Bad asked behind him.

"Yeah, I told y'all he was an asshole," Sapnap said.

The voices began to blend into the crowd and George found his head growing distraught as his emotions pulled toward the shifters, their anger so prominent it made his muscles stiffen.

Somebody grabbed his arm, but George was too out of it to properly register it. He saw a figure breaking through the crowd. The noise dialed down, but everyone's voices were still muffled. Sarah stepped inside the circle, her mouth opening and closing as she put herself in between the two shifters.

And then George blinked and a switch flicked on in his brain.

The screaming and the growling and the roaring and everyone's emotions and jumbled thoughts crashed into him at once. His knees buckled and his body collapsed. Someone leaned down to help steady him while simultaneously shouting into his ear, but he couldn't make out what they were saying.

He only watched as Sarah turned and locked eyes with him, her angry gaze shifting into concern. She rushed toward him and the corners of his vision grew blurry. He focused only on Sarah's face as she approached like he was looking through a magnifying glass, but when he reached forward to grab her, he found she was out of his reach.

Her mouth was moving, but everyone's voices and thoughts and emotions were too loud in his head.

They were too loud. Too loud and George's mind felt like it was shattering and pieces of it were colliding against one another.

“George.”

He blinked.

He opened his eyes to the sun blazing down on him at full potency. His whole body was hot, and he sat up and discarded the blanket beside him. Dream awoke almost as instantly as he did, blinking his eyes open and yawning loudly.

“Morning, already? I was so comfortable.”

“Comfortable? It's hot as hell.” George pinched the collar of his shirt away from his neck and breathed out, feeling sticky all over. He really needed a shower.

“That was literally the best sleep I've had in ages.”

“That's because you like sleeping like an animal outside,” George huffed. “You might as well be a shifter.”

Dream chuckled and sat up. “It's in my blood.”

George leaned on the side of the truck, taking a second to breathe a little, remnant emotions of his dream still resonating inside.

“You good?”

“Alright.”

Dream shuffled closer, watching him with interest. “Yesterday at the grocery store...”

George sat slightly straighter.

He had been awaiting the topic back at the hotel, but it hadn't seemed like Dream had wanted to trigger him. There hadn't been much time to talk between the hotel and the drive either. Although he knew they would talk about it eventually, he didn't expect it to be the first time in the morning after waking from a bad memory.

“Sapnap said you mentioned something about AGE during your, um, attack.”

George tried to recall the moment, but it felt fuzzy in his head as if someone had purposefully blurred out the memory.

“I don’t remember much.”

“That’s okay. Don’t force it.” Dream smiled.

They sat in silence for a moment. Skeppy and Sapnap’s auras were both barely discernible, so George knew they were still asleep.

“I don’t mean this to sound like I’m babying you. I’m really not. I’m just sort of worried but... you’re going to have to take it a lot easier when we get to Seattle. For the sake of your health and powers.”

“I know. I will. Don’t worry, Dream.”

“I can’t say that makes me feel any less worried considering what happened yesterday...”

George laughed, scooting closer and smiling up at him. With a tiny burst of confidence, he found his finger tracing the outline of Dream’s jaw.

“I get it, but just trust me that I’ll try my best to control the crazy Psychic inside.”

Dream’s cheeks were tinted pink, and George’s smile widened. It wasn’t often that their roles switched.

When he felt Sapnap stir awake inside the truck, George pulled away, standing up and jumping down. He turned to Dream whose mouth was still slightly agape.

“We should probably get on the road soon. Seattle’s waiting for us.”

Dream chuckled and shook his head. “They won’t know what hit them.”

Seattle was a bigger mess than the news made it out to be—or at least the area they were driving through was.

There were EMs openly using their powers everywhere. A flower shop owner growing their roses outside their shop in the open. A wolf cub shifting back into the form of a little boy and playing with another kid who was water-bending by an open fire hydrant. A girl opening a flame in her palm and making a burn barrel in the middle of the street.

Many of the buildings were either horribly worn out or closed off entirely, some overgrown with shrubs and spiky vines. The roads were bumpy and missing chunks in some parts. Light posts were rusted, wooden power poles were slanted and on the verge of falling, and the hanging traffic lights swung with every gust of wind.

They stopped at a beat-down gas station at one of the intersections. They did their best to disguise themselves, pulling on their hoods, a discarded beanie in the back seat, and using two pairs of shades Dream had stored in the glove compartment.

George took one of the pairs considering he was the one who was most wanted, and Dream took the other since, by his logic, his hair was the most distinct.

They turned off the engine and went into the building both to pay and for a much-needed restroom

break. Sappnap insisted on taking his sweet time in the toilet, so Dream and George ended up goofing around by one of the hallways and looking through items.

George gravitated toward a pair of clout goggles in one of the shelves. He exchanged them for his shades for a second to ask Dream if they looked good on him. Dream responded with a wheeze and said, "You look so stupid."

Pouting, George slipped them off and put on his other pair of shades again. He stared at them longingly for a moment before slipping them back on the rack. Not only were they incredibly attention-grabbing but they were also fairly expensive for their budget.

After Sappnap returned and Skeppy paid for their gas, they made their way out of the station. As they were walking back to the truck, George saw a couple of teenagers eyeing a woman who was putting gas in her car. One of them laughed and turned to her, raising his hand and causing the purse on her shoulder to fly out of her grasp and onto the concrete. Another really fast one rushed to grab the bag and made a run for it with his friends.

Although George didn't think bringing attention to themselves was a good idea, he couldn't help but remember the girl at the diner. When he glanced at Dream, he knew he was thinking the same thing. And so, as Dream dashed toward the guy on the run (who seemed just as fast if not faster than Dream), George found himself levitating the trash can he was about to pass and knocking it toward him, causing him to lose his momentum and trip over it.

Dream caught up and took the purse from his hand, giving him a few words before walking back to the woman and handing it to her. The teenagers took off running. The woman seemed to thank Dream profusely, and even offered him some cash, but Dream denied it and instead walked back toward them. He flashed George a small smile as they got back into the truck.

As Skeppy pulled out of the parking lot, George took notice of a strange aura jumping out at him, and he looked out the window to spot a figure with their hood up standing near where the teenagers had run past and staring at them as they drove away. He tried to tell himself it had just been a coincidence, but he couldn't help the bad feeling that swept over him.

The feeling intensified when Skeppy continued down the street. Sappnap turned on the radio to a popular pop song and started singing along at an annoyingly loud level from the front seat. Dream joined him, and soon, they were both screeching their lungs out.

"Drivin' through my heart. Breakin' it apart! I got my foot on the gas, I got my eye on the prize. As we're sliding, we're off the roads, we're drivin'! We're drivin' off our minds!"

Skeppy remained in his own little world as he drove. George turned away with a smile and looked out the window, watching the buildings as they passed and only hoping they would find Bad soon.

And then it happened.

It sounded like a bomb went off in his ears. And he was hitting the door to his right at full force. And he was flying. And he was upside down and his ears were screeching and in the background, he could still hear the distorted music playing.

He felt the passenger seat in front of him rubbing against his legs. He blinked his eyes open and closed, wondering if he was seeing right because Sappnap's mop of hair was spiking upwards in the seat in front of him. And then he felt the pressure against his chest and he realized he was hanging too. And when he tried to move, he felt the stabbing pain at his side and he looked down to see a spike of metal had ripped through his shirt and through his skin and there was blood everywhere.

Blood.

It was fresh on his hands. On his body. His vision blurred as his breathing began to rise and quicken. And he tried to rub it off but it was only making a bigger mess on him. His head was a jumbled mess and he blinked, trying to see if the image would go away, to see if he would wake up.

His vision flashed on and off.

His bloody seatbelt and then darkness.

The passenger seat and then darkness.

The glass spread all over the ceiling of the truck and then darkness.

Sarah's face getting closer and closer.

“George. You need to breathe.”

And then darkness.

His heart racing and his lungs aching because he couldn't inhale right.

“Don't let it control you.”

And then darkness.

His side of the car crumbled like a ball of metal. His head swirling and something striking against it from the inside.

“Breathe.”

And then darkness.

But this time, he didn't open his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

This story does NOT include character death, I promise.

Anyway, next week is the last chapter before we go into hiatus.... Not sure if y'all are ready for it aha

Also, [I would greatly appreciate if y'all could fill out this form about update schedules and interest in a future dicussion/Q&A type of event*](#)

Sinceramente,

Light <3

[tumblr](#) & [twitter](#)

Chapter Notes:

- Would it really be a roadtrip if we didn't have a camp out section?
- Ngl, the fire section took me so long to write, hope it gave off the right vibe
- Finally held hands pog? :O
- I figured they really needed a destressor so you're welcome :))
- Dream throwing George into the lake... I can't with them anymore and I'm the one freaking writing them
- Cuddling in bed counter: 4 (istg these two have been in their honeymoon stage for years now)
- George admitting his feelings to himself pog?
- Hm is George not liking parties ooc if we consider his irl "college" life?
- dnf is killing me help why did I make this a slow burn
- Who am I kidding, Dream definitely serenaded George the morning for his birthday but just wanted an excuse to hug him in a suit
- Also unrelated but low key bragging, did y'all know I share birthdays with gnf? Kind of funny lmao
- Credit for Luna Azul Ball goes to my friends during our skype sessions (they literally help me name almost half the things in this universe)
- Okay you caught me, 'Island in the Sun' was stuck in my head rent free while writing dnf dancing and I had to force my friends to rewatch Aquamarine (in Spanish of course) with me because the dancing scene there is iconic, what I would give to have a drawing of dnf dancing like this omg
- Also Sapnap coming in because he wants some affection too :))
- Poor Georgie doesn't get a break (tbf this is in the past)
- They just don't even have a chance to talk, sadly :((
- George flirting back?? Character development??? :O
- Also "They won't know what hit them" lmaooooo oops???
- If y'all don't remember, this story takes place a century into the future, so I'm not trying to say anything about Seattle, it's just the setting in this world ; - ;
- Clout goggles!!!
- George deciding to help a woman with his powers, character development pog?
- Mysterious figure watching our heroes trope, check!
- I'd like to announce that me and my friend spent almost an hour in the middle of the night coming up with the simple verse Dream and Sapnap were singing in the car so pls appreciate it ; - ;
- Car crash blackout trope, check... aha ˘(˘)˘/

Seattle

Chapter Notes

[IMPORTANT DISCLAIMER \(might include minor spoilers for the end of this chapter\)*](#)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The first thing George wanted to do when he regained consciousness was to throw up from the disgusting scent of disinfectant and chemicals stinging the air. The second thing he wanted to do—and what he actually did—was sneeze.

It woke him right up and when he opened his eyes, the light in the room felt like it was burning through his retinas. The heart monitor beside him was beeping at a steady rate. His chest was sore, and every time he breathed in, his lungs felt like they were burning from the inside. The paper-thin white sheets foiled his body but did nothing to ease the cold. His mouth tasted like liquid metal and medicine. He could feel the string of cold liquid surging into his bloodstream through the IV on his wrist and the little pulse contraption that weighed heavy on his finger.

Dream was by his side before he could even attempt to say a word. He was wearing a different shirt, his hair was a mess, and his face was stained with brown marks and a few gashes. He found it weird that they hadn't yet healed despite being so small considering Dream had the fastest healing ability out of all of them.

"You're awake," Dream said. His voice sounded like he was resubmerging after being underwater for a long time.

"What happened?" George's voice was hoarse and barely there when he replied.

Dream raised a glass to his mouth and let him take a small sip. The water was like ice on his throat and esophagus despite being room temperature.

"We crashed. Fucking reckless driver T-boned us."

Looking over his shoulder, George saw an unconscious Sapnap in a hospital gown laying on the bed beside him. His face was bruised, his lip was cracked open with a nasty black mark, and his arms were littered with scratches.

George tried hard to focus on his aura to ensure he was okay, but his mind felt fuzzy and weak and he couldn't quite feel him.

"My powers..."

Dream raised his wrists and showed him the cuffs around them. "Muters."

He had enough strength to raise one hand and realize Dream was right. He turned back to Sapnap and grimaced when he noticed he was wearing them too.

"His powers won't heal him if he has those on."

“I tried telling them, but they said that he would still heal normally, just slower.” Dream looked off to the side with a glare that could kill. “They don’t want to risk it. They know who we are.”

They fell into a dense and bitter silence.

George had expected they would be caught by their own fault—that he would eventually mess up and lose control and the police would catch them. He had even expected that someone would recognize them. The last way he expected for them to be caught was a car crash that was out of their control.

Despite knowing that everything had gone wrong, that they were completely fucked and they hadn’t even managed to find Bad, George had barely any energy to dread the consequences. If anything, he just wanted to close his eyes and slip back into unconsciousness, maybe relieve a memory while he was at it and pretend nothing was real too.

“Skeppy’s outside talking to the police. Our parents and the headmaster are on their way.” Dream’s voice was eerily void of emotion. He sounded just as tired as George felt.

“We failed.”

Dream rested his hand over George’s and rubbed his knuckle with his thumb. It felt weird—being incapable of sensing the warmth radiating from his aura. He hadn’t worn power restraints since the day he had moved to AGE, back when he thought telekinesis would be his biggest struggle. Now, the only thing he could feel was the cold air exiting the ventilator on the wall beside him and the raspy sheets on his skin.

George hated feeling so empty.

“I’m just glad you’re okay,” Dream said with a light smile.

When the door opened, his attention shifted to the hospital sounds.

Metal cartwheels rolling on the vinyl floors. A woman’s muffled voice talking over the intercom. Nurses speaking in hushed voices as they passed by. Cabinets opening and closing and a clipboard slamming on a counter.

Skeppy stepped inside and let the door shut behind him. He slid a chair over and spoke quietly. “What’s the plan?”

Dream sighed. “There is no plan. Sapnap’s unconscious, George’s hurt, we can’t even use our powers and our parents and the headmaster are on their way.”

“Bad’s still out there. We can’t just give up now.”

“What do you expect us to do, Skeppy? We can’t even break out. We’re under 24/7 surveillance and they won’t even let us leave the room without an escort.”

Skeppy thought it over for a moment before his eyes locked onto him.

“George. Can you do your weird mind thing that you did back at the hotel? With the man?”

“I don’t think so. My empathy’s not even working. My brain feels like mush.” He leaned back on his pillow, frowning as he felt a headache building. He hated the way muters made him feel so out-of-touch and on the verge of passing out from a wave of exhaustion.

“I’m sorry, Skeppy. But we’re going to have to find another way to help Bad. There’s no way we’re getting out of this one,” Dream said.

Skeppy groaned. He got on his feet and ran both hands through his spiky hair. He was still wearing the same outfit they had gotten in the wreck with, though it was now slightly torn and stained with dry blood.

“I’ll snatch a scanner. They won’t know. That way we can unlock our cuffs and use our powers to break out.”

“Are you expecting to destroy the hospital to escape? We’re not doing that, Skeppy. End of story.”

“There’s an emergency staircase right beside our door. We can get out in less than a minute if we hurry. They won’t catch up and we don’t have to make a mess or fight anyone.”

“Skeppy, stop.” Dream’s voice was growing more frustrated. “We’re not just going to leave Sapnap.”

“We can’t just give up now.”

“There’s a difference between giving up and having no options left.”

“We have an option. We can still do it.” Skeppy looked toward George, his eyebrows furrowed and his eyes desperate and glazed over. For once, George was glad he couldn’t absorb his emotions. “We can save Bad.”

George glanced at Sapnap. Though his eyelids were shut tight, his eyes were still darting around—as if he were stuck deep in his dream world living life without realizing he was unconscious on a hospital bed. He appeared so peaceful like this, and George couldn’t imagine him waking up without his friends at his side. Alone.

“We can’t leave Sapnap.”

“Nothing’s going to happen to him. The doctors said he’d be okay and his parents will be here soon anyway.”

George frowned at the mention of them, knowing that on top of waking up without his friends by his side, it would be more stressful for Sapnap to see his parents.

Standing up, Dream let out a frustrated groan and stood in front of him.

“Skeppy. You realize that they’re already letting us off the hook thanks to AGE? If we do this, there’s no guarantee that we’ll keep our freedom, whether we find Bad or not.”

Skeppy narrowed his eyes. He strutted forward. “I know that. But Bad is more important to me so I’m willing to take the risk. Are *you*?”

They stood facing each other, neither willing to back down. The longer the silence drew out, the more George just wanted to spring out of bed and step in between them. However, his ribcage still hurt from where the metal shred had punctured his torso, and his body was still half-drugged from all the antibiotics they must have used on him (even though his powers would’ve taken nothing and healed him well enough within hours).

Dream sighed and turned away in favor of locking eyes with George. George could tell he had made up his mind, and he was probably not going to like what he had to say.

"I'm not going to leave Sapnap here," George said, frowning at the fact Dream would even consider abandoning their friend.

Dream pursed his lips. He looked away momentarily. A wave of nausea fell over George.

"You don't have to. Skeppy and I are going."

"What? No."

"You're not in the best condition to be on the run, George."

"My powers will take care of it."

Dream settled on the edge of the bed and scanned him with a firm look that frustrated George.

"We agreed you'd take it easy."

"That was before everything went to shit."

"Exactly. You're more likely to lose control now. We can't risk it."

George watched him through narrowed eyes. "You need me, Dream. More than you think."

Dream hesitated, a clear conflicted look in his eyes. "What about Sapnap?"

He got a twisted feeling in his gut as he glanced over at their unconscious friend. "Skeppy's right. He'll be okay, but we can't say the same for Bad." He met his eyes again. "Or for you guys."

Dream's frown intensified, but before he could protest, the door opened and George realized that Skeppy had snuck out of the room at one point during their conversation. He slid the scanner out from under his hoodie and raised it to his knuckles to unlatch his muters. He did the same for Dream. When he moved on to George, Dream held Skeppy back.

Without hesitation, George stated, "I'm going."

Dream didn't say anything, but he also didn't stop Skeppy when he went to take off George's muters.

The overpowering sensation of their auras hit him blank in the face when his powers returned, and it took him a second to register his surroundings. When he turned to Sapnap, he finally felt the faded aura as if he were deep asleep. It reassured him all the bit, and he yanked out the IV and slid his feet over the ledge, breathing for a moment before standing up slowly.

George put on a pair of sweats and a hoodie Dream had in his backpack. As he changed, he watched Dream take the scanner from Skeppy and unlatch Sapnap's cuffs. Dream remained beside the bed for a moment with a sad expression, and he raised his fingers to Sapnap's face, grazing his jaw tenderly. It didn't help the guilt building in George's chest.

"There's an officer outside who I stole the scanner from," Skeppy said. "Do you think you can do your whole hyponization thing on him?"

George pursed his lips, but knowing there was no other way, he responded with a hesitant nod.

After peeping through the window on the door and making sure there was no one else in sight, he closed his eyes to concentrate for a moment before walking out of the room first. The man turned almost instantly, and his face contorted into pure panic. He reached for his radio, but before he

could use it, George channeled all his focus on the man's mind, hooking it in and recreating the energy he had felt back at the hotel.

He could see his thoughts forming little pictures in his head and his emotions swirling like a blend of watercolors in the background. Splotches of sharp yellow and dull orange over a cloud of eerie gray. A girl with brown pigtails. A woman with vibrant hazel eyes. A tiny and worn apartment in downtown.

Admittedly, it was exhilarating—watching the man freeze up and his eyes glaze over into a zombified state. And for a moment, George considered going through all the way. Drilling into his thoughts and breaking his mind apart like a jigsaw puzzle. He nearly did listen to the tempting thought, but he came to his senses once he heard the door open behind him.

Dream and Skeppy snuck out and headed toward the exit door behind him. George backed away slowly, keeping his focus on the man and only releasing his mind once he was right by the door. They walked out before the man could regain consciousness.

The upside about Seattle streets was that wearing your hood up didn't categorize you as suspicious.

The number of EMs littering the streets left and right was shocking: parents, elders, kids, workers, beggars, druggies. George had never witnessed such a diverse group of EMs in public.

"There should be a shopping complex down the road. When we get new disguises, we can stop by the downtown library to see what we can find on old EM government facilities," Dream told them as they wandered down a somewhat isolated street, trying to remain as unnoticeable as possible.

The echoes of traffic noises and police sirens from miles away resonated through the mostly abandoned block. As they walked, George's eyes traced over the beggars sleeping beside buildings and benches with sympathy.

When they neared the corner, their attention was drawn toward a group of guys bundled by the entrance of an alley and standing in a circle on the other side of the street. George was going to ignore them, but Dream thought otherwise, and he halted abruptly, making George almost crash into his back.

He was about to ask why they had stopped when he heard the conversation from across the street.

"No harm in hanging out with us for a bit. Drinks are on us. Actually, we're even going to a party later today at Inferno, why don't you come with us?"

"Not interested," replied a female voice.

"Aw come on, beautiful, you can't leave so soon."

It took one glimpse from Dream for George to know exactly what he was about to do. Although Skeppy seemed conflicted about what action to take next, he ultimately followed Dream.

Crossing the street, they approached the alley where George could make out the three figures more clearly. Every part of him was telling him to get out of there. That they were walking straight toward trouble, but he knew Dream wasn't going to back down.

One of the guys—the middle one who was talking—had a large and muscular build that was visible even through his baggy sweatshirt. Beside him, there was a significantly lankier guy who

was wearing a backward baseball cap. The third guy was leaning against the bricked wall with a cigarette between his lips. All three were encircling a pretty blonde girl whose expression remained stern as she centered her gaze on the middle guy.

“Stop being an asshole and get out of my way,” she said.

The middle guy took it as a challenge, and he stepped forward, his grin widening. He reached his hand for her, and it was all it took for Dream to pounce.

“Hey!” Dream called out before he could, earning the attention of the four figures. George felt bad for dreading what was about to happen.

“Leave her alone.”

The main guy arched an eyebrow, eyeing Dream up and down and then glancing between George and Skeppy.

“Who the hell are you supposed to be?”

“Looks like a bunch of nobodies to me,” the guy with the cigarette said and blew out a cloud of smoke. “Don’t think they know how things work around here, Al.”

Al laughed, turning to face Dream properly when he stopped a meter away from him. He crossed his arms. Their eyes drilled into each other.

“I think you should get lost, buddy. Things won’t end well for you if you don’t.”

George could feel Dream’s anger peaking, and uncertain, he got closer and whispered, “We can’t start a fight.”

Al seemed to catch onto his words, however. “Hear that, boys? They really think they can take us.”

Dream grimaced, ignoring George and instead taking another step forward. George’s breath hitched when he saw Al do the same. Behind him, the blonde girl was watching them with intent.

“Why don’t we show them what they’re up against, Ty?”

“Gladly,” the guy at the wall, Ty, spit out his cigarette and grinned like a maniac. In less than a second, both his hands burst into flames.

On his other side, the guy with the cap flashed them a grin and drew out his sharpened canines. His nails protruded out like claws. It was only then that George noticed the ears poking under his hat and barely visible in between his brown hair.

“I’m giving you one more warning, buddy. Back the hell up,” Al spoke with caution.

Slowly, he snatched a scrap of metal from the ground and used both hands to bend it without effort like he was trying to scare them off. When Dream didn’t back away, Al grew frustrated and threw the first punch.

It was all it took for everyone to break into action.

Dream stopped his fist with his hand and then punched Al across the jaw. Stunned, Al stumbled back and seemed to finally realize they were EMs too. He narrowed his eyes and grimaced.

“That’s it.” Al lunged forward again.

On his other side, Ty launched a fireball toward Skeppy who swiped a trash can lid with one swift movement to block it. In front of him, the hybrid launched toward George with his claws drawn. He barely managed to jump out of the way.

George felt like he was back at the ring with Techno on his tail. He dodged and weaved under the hybrid's attacks. His claws drew lines across his vision. They grazed his cheek and made him yelp when he felt the stinging. On his peripheral, he caught Skeppy launching the trash can lid his way. George barely caught it. The hybrid's nails scraped the metal when he swung again and the sound of it made George's ears hurt.

"Heads up," Dream shouted behind him. He turned, barely managing to duck under a dumpster flying his way. It sent both his lid and the hybrid flying out of the alley.

Nearby, Skeppy was concentrating on dodging Ty's fire charges. Ty grimaced, and he dashed toward him with a huge flame in hand and launched it straight at him. Skeppy retaliated with a whirlwind that sent a small fire twister back at Ty. It blinded his vision, and Skeppy burst through the cloud of smoke and hit him square in the head with a scrap of wood from the floor.

Beside them, Dream was still sparring against Al who barely noticed his two friends had been knocked out cold. With the momentary distraction, Dream managed to gain the upper hand and smash him to the ground. He stood over him with his fists drawn and Al backed away, glaring before he got on his feet and ran over to Ty who let out a pained groan as he wrapped one arm around Al's shoulders.

"You guys are fucking insane," Al shouted before he rushed out of the alleyway, following the hybrid who had barely recuperated from being hit by the dumpster. They ran off like dogs with their tails between their legs.

Skeppy laughed, shouted out a "Hanyah!" and threw his fists in the air.

The adrenaline still had George's head buzzing with energy, and he had to step back to steady himself on the wall and catch his breath. Dream approached him to check if he was okay, but before he got to say anything, the forgotten blonde girl said, "I appreciate it, but Al's harmless. He's full of himself, but he's too stupid to be a real threat. You really didn't have to do that."

She stood a few meters away staring at them with intrigue, not appearing even a bit scared or surprised whatsoever. Her head was tilted and she had her arms crossed. It wasn't exactly what George expected after having defended her.

"Looked like a threat to me when he was trying to knock the shit out of me." Dream snorted. "But sorry if we caused you any trouble. We'll just get going."

Just as they were about to head out of the alley, the girl spoke up. "You guys are the ones from the news, aren't you?"

George's blood ran cold and his whole body tensed up. He turned around, instinctively getting ready to use his powers on her but she was quick to say, "Don't worry. I'm not going to say anything."

It made George pause, and he looked toward Dream who appeared just as puzzled. "What do you want?"

"Nothing."

Dream remained unconvinced.

“Really,” the girl repeated, stepping away from the wall to get closer. She reached into her pocket, and George’s eyes went wide, all kinds of alarms blaring in his head. However, his panic turned into confusion just as quickly when he saw her take out a tiny bud. She hovered her other palm above it and slowly, it bloomed into a seedling.

“You’re an EM?” Skeppy asked in surprise.

Her smile grew wider when she looked up again.

“I did say Al wasn’t a threat to me.” She kneeled down and placed the seedling on a dirt patch, patting it lightly and letting it flourish into a pretty Marigold. Then she stood again and regarded them once more.

“You guys have sure made a name for yourselves out here.”

Dream shrugged. “We’re in a bit of a hurry so—”

“To do what?”

Hesitantly, they all glanced at each other, not exactly wanting to uncover themselves more than they already had. Not to mention, George wasn’t about to trust a random stranger in the street.

“What would a couple of AGE students be doing in Seattle? Are you looking for something?”

“That’s not your business,” George said.

She seemed a little taken aback by not only his sudden comment but also his half-aggressive tone. “It’s not, but maybe I can help.”

Narrowing his eyes, Dream asked, “Why would you want to help us?”

She stared at him momentarily. George found it hard to read her. He wasn’t sure if it was just Dream and Skeppy’s auras overpowering hers or if she was actually able to block him out, but her mind felt out of reach. It only made him more hesitant toward her as he had no way of knowing where her intentions stood.

Taking out a piece of paper and a pen from the small bag she was carrying, she scribbled something on it. Then she offered the slip to Dream. George stepped closer to peak at it. It had an address written on it.

“I have a feeling we can help each other out. Go there if you want. Trust me when I say, you won’t regret it.” She backed away toward the entrance of the alley, but before turning to leave, the sides of her mouth crinkled and she smiled wide.

“Tell them Niki sent you.”

And then she walked off before they could ask her anything else.

“Are you sure this is the address?”

They stood in front of a technology shop named Technapaloozical’s Corner at the end of a lone street. Although it was a rather ridiculous name, the high pitch hum of the glowing open sign behind the barred windows was unsettling. George glimpsed through the glass door but there was no one at the front desk. Just as he was about to open the door, Dream said, “Yeah. Though, uh, it

says back door?”

Spotting a small corridor alleyway beside the building, George walked over to investigate. There was a door half-hidden by a dumpster in the very back. A camera with a flickering light was pointed toward the entrance of it. It didn't exactly give off the safest impression.

“You mean that one?”

“Maybe?”

Hesitantly walking over to it, George tried the handle, and after finding it locked, Skeppy pressed what appeared to be a call-receiver button at the side of the door.

At first, there was no reply. Seeing as how suspicious the situation appeared, George was about to suggest they leave until what seemed like an artificial deep voice answered them through the speaker.

“Who are you and what do you want?”

George pursed his lips and shot Dream a worried look. He seemed as apprehensive as George was about the situation. Seattle was already an unsettling place with a lot of sketchy people on its own but being handed a mysterious address by some random EM on the street did not resonate well with him, and so he was about to propose they find another lead until Skeppy replied.

“Niki sent us. She said you could help us?”

The voice was silent for a second before the door unlocked and a gloved hand reached out and handed them three blindfolds. Puzzled, Dream took them and then tried to sneak a peek inside, but the door closed in his face before he could.

The longer it went on the more George just wanted to return to the hospital and deal with the consequences, but he knew neither Dream nor Skeppy would want to back out now. Especially considering the latter was growing more desperate by the minute. It wasn't that George didn't understand where he was coming from, but he was worried Skeppy would only end up making an irrational decision by leading with his emotions.

“Put those on.”

“We don't—” Dream tried to protest.

“Put them on!”

Dream looked toward George for reassurance, but he couldn't find it in himself to offer any. On the contrary, everything about the setting was screaming at George to turn back now. There had to be another way that didn't involve walking straight into a sketchy building that might've as well been an EM trafficking operation base or worse. Even more worrisome was the fact that if they did go missing, nobody would know where to look for them and Sapnap would awake in the hospital not knowing what happened to his best friends or why they abandoned him.

Dream's hand on his shoulder snapped him out of his thoughts. Skeppy had already put his blindfold on and Dream was staring at him with that annoying look that said 'trust me.' It wasn't that George didn't trust him, it was more like he didn't trust whoever was behind that door. Gripping the black fabric in his hands, he took a deep breath and then tied it around his eyes.

As soon as he did, he heard the door lock click and he felt two presences approach them. A

significantly higher pitched tone that sounded like it was trying to imitate a deeper voice spoke.

“Come on in.”

George felt himself be pulled inside. “Watch out for the stairs.”

He nearly misstepped on the first step, but behind him, Dream steadied him almost instinctively. George’s breath hitched at both almost falling and the feel of Dream’s warm hands gripping his arms tight.

The mysterious voice and the silent presence beside them led them down a staircase and what sounded like a hollow and lengthy hallway. They stopped at what seemed to be a few more doors before continuing inside until George heard a metal chair’s legs scraping against the concrete floor and being set behind him.

“Sit down and take off your blindfolds.”

When George untied the blindfold and opened his eyes, it took a second for them to adjust, but when they did, he certainly didn’t expect what he saw. There was a sole table in front of them with the spotlight of white light from a computer lamp pointed at their faces and making everything harder to see. He reached his hand in front of his eyes to properly look behind it.

Two teenage boys were standing behind the table staring them down. The taller one had messy, sandy blonde hair and stood akimbo with a determined look on his face like he was trying to appear intimidating (though he wasn’t doing a very good job at it). Meanwhile, the brown-haired boy beside him had his hands inclined on the table and was watching them through narrowed eyes. George found himself more confused than worried about the situation, and from Dream and Skeppy’s auras beside him, he could tell they felt similarly.

“Who are you?” “What do you want?” The two British boys shouted over each other. Then they exchanged a glance and after, turned back to look at George and his friends. “Why are you here?” “How did you find us?”

Looking at each other again, the blonde one groaned and pulled the other boy back, speaking a low, “Big T, a moment, please?”

They turned around and whispered to each other, though George didn’t need Dream’s superhuman ears to hear them.

“Tubbo! What did I tell you?”

“Uh, you said to follow your lead?”

“Yes, and that means for you to stand back and let me do the questioning.”

“Got it.”

They turned around again, and the blonde stomped over, slamming his hands on the table and glaring between them. “Alright, listen up fuckers. You’re going to tell me who you are and what you’re doing here right now.”

“Yeah, right now!”

The blonde boy sent his friend (Tubbo?) a glare that made Dream snort. He looked back at Dream in an instant. “Who are you laughing at, bitch boy?”

"I thought our interrogator would be scarier than this," Skeppy said.

The blonde boy might've as well been fuming from his ears. He pulled his sleeves up, flared his nostrils, and made his way toward Skeppy with his fists clenched. "Oh, I'll show you scary!"

"Wait!" Tubbo got in front of him before he could, offering an awkward chuckle. "Uh..." He glanced at the three of them and then dragged the other boy toward the wall to discuss among themselves again.

"Phil's gonna be upset if you beat up the guests."

"Phil's not here, so by default, I'm the lead today. And I can beat up whoever the fuck I want!"

"What about Wilbur?"

"He doesn't have to know."

"But Niki already called to tell us they were coming."

"She doesn't have to—"

"I hate to interrupt whatever it is you two are doing but can we talk to whoever's in charge here?" Dream asked.

Looking over his shoulder, the blonde grimaced. "I'm the one in charge so you can talk to me."

"I highly doubt they'd put a child in charge."

"I'm not a child!"

"Yeah, he just turned fourteen!"

"Tubbo," the child glared at Tubbo. "You're not helping."

"Look, uh—" Dream raised an eyebrow and the blonde groaned.

"It's Tommy."

"Tommy." Dream sounded like he was trying not to laugh and George couldn't help but snicker at the sound of it. It earned him a glare from Tommy too. "We just want to know who we can talk to about getting help."

"You can talk to me."

Chuckling lightly, Dream replied, "Is there maybe someone a little older that could help us?"

"I'll have you know I'm very mature for my age."

"Yeah. We both are!" Tubbo perked in.

"I am." Tommy pointed at himself. "So whatever you want help with, you can ask me for it." He crossed his arms and smiled smugly.

George huffed, rolling his eyes and figuring Niki's lead had been a waste of time after all. Though at least they hadn't been robbed, kidnapped, or killed, so he guessed that was a plus.

Staring at Tommy, Dream looked like he was trying his hardest to contain his laughter. After a

minute, he finally managed to get it together and clear his throat. "On second thought, I think we'll just leave instead."

"Wait, you can't leave," Tubbo shouted as they stood up. He looked straight at George. "You're that Psychic from the news, right? I saw you save that woman at the petrol station."

"You saw—" George furrowed his eyebrows, suddenly remembering the figure he had seen watching them right before the car accident. "What do you want from us?"

"We need your help with our mission."

"Mission?" Skeppy asked.

Tommy cleared his throat and stepped in front of Dream. "Look, I reckon you're in need of help so from man to man, we have a proposition for you." He leaned his elbows on the table and looked at them through narrowed eyes. "You help us and we help you."

"Help with what?"

"You go first, big man."

Sighing, Dream signaled George and Skeppy toward the door. "I think we're done here."

Tommy jumped in front of them before they could. "You don't get to leave before I tell you to leave!"

Out of nowhere, the door opened and a relatively good-looking tall guy in a yellow long-sleeve with long, spiky brown hair peeking out of a red beanie and partly covering his right eye poked his head into the room in confusion. He looked toward Tommy and Tubbo and then at the trio and then back at the two boys.

"Tommy. What the fuck is going on here? Why have you put our guests in the cupboard?"

"Uh, hey, Wilby, we were just, uh, you know, showing them around." Tommy's voice instantly shifted from its previous assurance into a more high-pitched and unsure tone.

The guy looked around. "Showing them the spare cupboard?"

"It is really nice and big," Tubbo pointed out as he looked around.

"We, uh, brought a table inside and some chairs to make them comfortable," Tommy added while scratching the back of his head. "And a, um, big, bright lamp to help them see better too..." He chuckled awkwardly.

The guy looked unconvinced. "I'll deal with you both later," he muttered before walking past them and toward Dream. George felt his fight or flight instincts kick in as the guy reached his hand out but instead of launching any sort of attack, he offered a handshake.

Dream hesitantly took it.

The corners of his mouth turned up into a charming smile. "Sorry about them, mate. Name's Wilbur." He looked in between them with growing interest. "You're the lads who helped Niki earlier, right?"

"Yeah..." Dream watched him with hesitance. "I'm Dream and these are Skeppy and George."

“It’s a pleasure. Why don’t you follow me out there and we can talk in the living room?”

He sent Tommy and Tubbo a slight glare as they passed but then shone his smile back toward Dream, Skeppy, and George.

Wilbur led them out of the cupboard into a fairly modern-looking room with a long sofa in front of a plasma TV and a kitchen directly connected to it. To their left, there was a hallway with several doors branching on each side and a single open one at the end that lead to some sort of conference table.

They sat down on the sofa in front of Wilbur who watched them all with an alluring grin and an aura that helped George feel more at ease in the foreign bunker. Tommy and Tubbo followed close behind, settling themselves at the other side of the room whisper-shouting amongst themselves, though this time, George couldn’t quite hear them. By Dream’s quiet chuckles though, he assumed they were still bickering.

“Tommy and Tubbo, why don’t you guys go call Phil?”

“But we want to—”

“Call Phil,” Wilbur spoke more clearly.

Frowning, Tommy grumbled under his breath and marched toward the hallway. Tubbo smiled and waved goodbye with awkward excitement before following in his footsteps.

Turning back to the trio, Wilbur chuckled and looked at each of them with interest.

“Word on the street has it you’ve been causing a ruckus all across the states, haven’t you?” He leaned against the coffee table in front of where the TV was mounted with his arms and legs crossed. His eyebrows scrunched together momentarily. “Weren’t there four of you?”

George pursed his lips nervously and felt Dream tense up beside him. “Our friend is recovering from something right now, so he’s not with us,” Dream explained.

“Oh.” Wilbur tilted his head. “Well then. I hope he’s alright. I hear you’re in Seattle for a reason, right? I suppose since you took up Niki’s offer, you’ve got to need help with something. Why don’t you tell me what you need?”

“After you tell us what you need,” Dream replied with suspicion but made sure his words were clear, “we’ll tell you what we need.”

Wilbur examined him for a second before his smile widened. “Fair enough. We—”

“Wilbur.” Another voice caught their attention from the hallway, and they all turned toward it.

As soon as George locked eyes with the new guy, a trail of goosebumps travelled across his body. There wasn’t anything externally malicious about the newcomer’s appearance. He wore a formal black suit with a red tie that contrasted against his jacket and the white shirt below. His brown hair was curly and messy and his wide-toothed smile looked half-sinister below his brown mustache and with both eyebrows raised.

However, behind his oddly formal attire, there was something off about his aura. It vaguely reminded George of all those times Dream didn’t want George catching onto a certain emotion, and he masked it so even though George couldn’t tell what he was feeling, he knew he was hiding something.

There was a well-rehearsed component to the guy's demeanor.

He stepped forward with both hands inside the pockets of his pantsuit, watching George and his friends with interest.

"Mind introducing me to our new guests? Recruits, by any chance?"

"Schlatt. I hadn't realized you got out of work so early. They're not recruits, mate." Wilbur looked them over. "At least not yet," he said with a shining smile, "but they do need help and we most definitely could use theirs."

Schlatt approached. He scrutinized them all individually before his eyes locked onto George at the end of the line. George felt exposed under his gaze, but for whatever reason, he couldn't look away. When he attempted to get inside his mind, he was met with retaliation, and he found himself jerking back from the unexpected action. Dream put his hand on his shoulder to steady him.

For a second, Schlatt continued staring at him before his mouth twisted into a grin again and he chuckled.

"Sorry. I haven't properly introduced myself, have I? I'm Schlatt, Phil's right-hand man."

"Who's Phil?" Skeppy asked.

Schlatt turned to Wilbur. "You haven't told them?"

"I was just about to do so before you got here." Wilbur opened his arms wide to signal the room. "Welcome to Sleepy HQ," he told them with a proud smirk.

"Home of the Bergman Defenders."

Chapter End Notes

Super duper important information about everything related to the hiatus, updates, the spin-off (which y'all can probably guess what it might be about aha), and the story ahead, so make sure to read!

By popular demand on the survey, I will be doing two Q&A's for this story. The first will be a simple Twitter Q&A that will take place this coming Monday at 5PM CT. There's an announcement about it on my Twitter. You don't need Twitter to send me questions, you can send anonymous questions through [this form](#) or you can tag me @Mel_LightNS me the day of with your questions. It's just a small little event to interact with y'all and answer some of the questions I've gotten about things like world-building, writing, the Extramundane universe, etc.

The second Q&A will be a little bigger and will take place on Twitch the weekend of the finale (there will be a post on my Twitter very soon about the date and time for the finale release). I will be talking about the story in full seeing as it will have ended (?) by then and there will probably be a little more fun stuff involved :D

As of now, we are in hiatus. The prospective date for Chapter 13's release is Friday, May 14th. I will be posting the names of the chapters and a full release date schedule on my Twitter for both Aether's Legacy and the spinoff.

... Speaking of the spinoff. Y'all ready for a little announcement?

Drum Roll

Runaway Destinies, Woven Stories, & Kindred Hearts

Summary: Tommy doesn't need a home. He's been fine on his own—it's just better that way. His parents? Buried six feet underground. His old crew? Arrested for "domestic terrorism" or some bullshit excuse like that. Tommy doesn't need a family, so he doesn't understand why this new group of strangers insist on taking him in.

Worst of all—they're peace warriors. Tommy despises peace warriors. In a war split between super-powered freaks vs. normals who like to shit on them, peace warriors refuse to fight. The only way to save their kind, Tommy believes, is through aggressive confrontation. But Phil doesn't believe that, and Tommy is set on proving him wrong. Unfortunately, going against a multi-billion dollar manufacturing company that exploits Extramundanes on his own isn't quite as easy as he believed. It doesn't help that this random annoying Aqua boy is insistent on helping him out. But again, Tommy doesn't need anyone. He's always been fine on his own.

//Extramundane Origins: Bergman Defenders; in-canon with Aether's Legacy

What do y'all think? Anybody else excited?

There are four chapters, and they will be released on the same days the last four chapters of Aether's Legacy are posted. This story is about the origins of the Bergman Defenders and it, thus, takes place in the past. It can be read as a standalone as well, so it doesn't depend on you reading Aether's Legacy. I did that so people who aren't comfy with shippy fics can still enjoy a little sbi found family in this universe without having to read dnf.

The schedule and chapter names for both stories will be posted on my Twitter soon and so will a lot of other tidbits and extra things during the hiatus.

Finally, Aether's Legacy and this universe is so deeply personal and special to me and I appreciate all you've done for me. You've offered me a voice and a place to share my creation with the world and for that, I couldn't be more thankful. Y'all are the absolute most sweetest and interactive community of readers I've had in my seven years of writing fanfiction, and I love reading all your sweet comments about how much you're enjoying this story! Thank you so much for everything! Don't be afraid to interact with me on Twitter or Tumblr, I love talking to y'all!

Also, this is basically the perfect point for readers to come into the story seeing as we have four major chapters left and we're almost at 90k words, so y'all can share with your friends if you'd think they'd enjoy the story too! :))

See y'all in three weeks!

Con muchisimo amor,

Light <3

[tumblr](#) & [twitter](#)

Chapter Notes:

- When I tell y'all my best friend really said "Why is he either always waking up or thinking something is boring?" about my hooks for scenes... I looked at her like D:
- NIKI WOOOO
- Walking into a mysterious dark alley and getting handed a blindfold to put on, seems logical (/j /j /j please, do not try at home, this is a fictional story)
- and I quote, Grav, "tommy and tubbo? tommy and tubbo? TOMMY AD YUBBP?"
- Good cop bad cop scene, ugh such a classic
- BERGMAN DEFENDERS how did nobody catch it

Bergman Defenders

Chapter Notes

Round of applause for Grav who still took the time to revise this despite me sending it supper late, thank you so much <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

This absolutely could not be happening.

Just a few days ago, George had been arguing with Dream about his vehement disagreement on the way the Bergman Defenders operated. And now he was sitting in their living room being propositioned for an operation—an *illegal* operation that would most definitely bump them to number one in the wanted list and get him locked up behind metal bars or worse, a facility. It felt like fate had just slapped him straight across the face with a brick.

“It’s simple. You help us expose Project Salvida and we’ll help you.”

“We’re looking for the facility where our friend is being kept. Are you sure you know where that is?” Skeppy asked.

“Of course we do. We know everything around here,” Wilbur assured him. He slung his arm over the armrest of the couch and smiled coyly. “Phil’s on his way to debrief you on the mission, if you agree that is.”

“And we could really use the help of a Psychic on this,” Schlatt added with a smile and sent him a look. George didn’t meet his eyes. Instead, he sunk further into the cushions and leaned into Dream.

“We’re in,” Dream said.

George did a double take. “Woah, hold on.” He shook his head frantically and stood up, attempting to process what the hell was going on. He turned to Dream and Skeppy and eyed them warily.

“Guys? A second? Shouldn’t we talk about this first?”

“Alright. A few minutes to discuss then. I’ll leave you be.” Wilbur got on his feet and gestured to Schlatt toward the hallway. He flashed them another smile and said, “Just know we do this to help our community when the city doesn’t. We don’t intend any harm or anything. Take your time,” before following Wilbur.

When he heard the door at the end of the hallway close, he stepped in front of Skeppy and Dream with both eyebrows raised, unbelieving of how easily they had just agreed to help wanted criminals they didn’t even personally know. Especially after they’d just escaped from a fucking hospital and every news station in the country was displaying their names with shiny letters and a hefty reward for their skins.

“What happened to our not-dragging-attention-to-ourselves promise? This is like the complete opposite of what we should be doing.”

“We don’t have another option,” Skeppy replied.

“Says the guy who insisted we had another option like a few hours ago,” George pointed out. He alternated glances at them with a wide-eyed expression. “Guys? We can’t just join a criminal activist group. We’re throwing ourselves into the lion’s den here.”

“They’re not asking us to join the group, George. They’re asking us to help. Just this once,” Dream said. Exhaling a long breath, he stood up and locked his gaze on him. It made George’s fingers buzz with unpleasant energy. “Look. We’re going to do this. If it means saving Bad and helping EMs while we’re at it then this is clearly the best choice.”

“The best choice for *you*, Dream. ” George couldn’t keep the animosity from his tone. “But if we do this and we get caught, it’s all over for us. We won’t be able to go back to AGE. We’ll be locked up and we might not even end up finding Bad. It’s too risky.”

Dream stared George down, and his next words felt like a bullet to the chest. “You wanted to come, George. If you can’t deal with it, go back to the hospital.”

George took a step back. His eyebrows furrowed together and his voice came out fragile and quiet. “You don’t mean that.”

There was a moment of silence.

Skeppy took it as a chance to clear his throat. “I’m going to go find the restroom...” he said before scurrying away.

Dream and George completely disregarded him and instead continued staring at each other. George’s ears were all the sudden more aware of the gentle stream of air exiting from the vent in the corner of the room. The way it stuck cold against his skin and kept him on his toes.

“George.” Frowning, Dream took a deep breath. The gap in his lips remained for a second, hesitating to admit his true thoughts. “I just don’t want you to get hurt. And that way you can stay with Sapnap. He won’t wake up by himself. Skeppy and I can take it. We’ll have help and we’ll be able to find Bad easily after this. There’s no point in risking all of us.”

Clenching his fists, George marched forward. He stopped only a few centimeters from him. Dream’s emotions and thoughts were completely closed off at this point, but George didn’t need his telepathy to understand him.

“That’s just it! This mission is already a big risk and you still want to take it.” His words were like daggers scraping against metal. “Just admit that you’ve always thought of me as a liability—that you didn’t think I was capable of this trip in the first place.” George tried to keep his voice from cracking. But it failed him. “Next thing you’re going to tell me is that the only reason you became my friend was because you thought I needed protection.”

Dream remained unmoving. The creases on his brow softened at the accusation, but his voice kept the same resoluteness. “You know that’s not true.” He exhaled, running a hand through his hair and turning away.

George wanted to grip his shoulders and turn him. Force him to look into his eyes. Force him to open up for once and be completely honest with himself. He was tired of their games. He was tired of the arguing. He was tired of himself.

He was tired.

“It’s the best choice and you know it. If you don’t think that... then you might as well just leave. Us fighting is only going to make everything worse here. You don’t have to worry about us. We

have help.”

George pressed a hand on Dream’s shoulder and made him half-turn, locking their gazes again. He couldn’t help the desperation in his voice when he said, “Dream. Please. We don’t have to do this.”

Dream’s aura finally came into focus and revealed a pang of shrouded guilt below his stubborn determination. The front door interrupted them. They turned to see a blonde man with a faded stubble and a silly slouchy striped hat stride inside.

The man spotted them and smiled almost instantly, approaching them to shake their hands and introduce himself. “You must be Niki’s guests. Sorry I was running a bit late. Name’s Phil... and you two are?”

They stumbled over their introductions while Phil shook their hands.

The door opened wider and behind him, two figures walked inside. George’s jaw hit the ground when he recognized them.

“Techno?” “Dream?”

“Fundy?” “George?”

“What are you doing here?” they asked all at once.

Phil shut the door, smiling wide and looking in between the four. “I take it you lads know each other?”

“Saying we know each other is kinda an understatement,” Dream said while crossing his arms. George almost wanted to laugh at the slight bitterness in the statement.

Phil raised a curious eyebrow. “Alright, well. Let’s go talk about this in the meeting room, yeah?”

“So you’re telling me *these* are your mates from AGE?” Wilbur cracked up, watching them all with astonishment.

“Well.” Dream cleared his throat. He raised his chin to look toward Techno. “I wouldn’t exactly say we’re best friends.”

“Wait a second!” Tommy jumped up from his chair. He scrutinized Dream through narrowed eyes. Then he burst into maniac cackles and clapped his hands together. “Is this the guy you beat at that mod competition Fundy showed us a video of?”

Dream scoffed. “It was by like three seconds.”

George stifled a snicker.

Techno, who was leaning against the wall by the door, looked over at them, his smirk barely visible but still smug. He swiped his long, pink braid off his shoulder and crossed his arms, sending Dream an unimpressed eyebrow raise. “It’s been almost four years and the guy is still salty about it. He just doesn’t like to admit it.”

Dream snorted in the way he usually did when he was trying to preserve his dignity. George was both amused and annoyed at the fact they were wasting time. “I am not salty.”

George huffed and leaned back on his chair, pursing his lips and looking around the room. It was a conference room with a humongous table that could seat at least twenty. In the front of the room, Phil was setting up something on the large computer monitor with a plasma TV showing a visual of the cameras in the building: one in the technology store, one in the alleyway entrance, and one in the front of the building.

“Does nobody run the front desk at all? Aren’t you guys worried about being robbed or something?” Skeppy had asked earlier.

“Nah. We have a reputation around here. Who’d try to rob us?” Wilbur replied.

“He’s lyin’. They’ve broken in and stolen plenty of stuff before. Don’t even know why they bothered breakin’ the front window, they could’ve just walked in and taken it. Nobody takes care of the shop around here anymore,” Techno said.

Dream and George had laughed at that.

Across from him, Niki was looking over Tubbo’s shoulder, pointing and whispering every so often, as he frantically pressed the buttons of his game console with an intense look of concentration. She looked so different in this light. Her demeanor was kind and relaxed, constantly smiling, joking around with the others and dropping everything to help them. George was hesitant to admit he felt like she could be trusted. Tubbo was somewhat similar, though George had noticed he had a certain wit to his remarks, and he liked to play dumb sometimes.

Beside them, Fundy was focused on typing on his laptop. Although George hadn’t talked to him all that much during their time at AGE, the one thing he knew for certain was the hybrid was obsessed with computers, and he was pretty amazing with them too. They had taken a computer science course together the year prior. Seeing as George sat behind him, he had always noticed Fundy was so good at coding that he finished his assignment during the first fifteen minutes just so he could code what looked to be Minebuild mods the rest of the time. George had always wanted to ask if he could test them, but Sapnap and Fundy had always had a little unofficial rivalry that had kept George from so much as talking to him.

When he saw Fundy notice him staring, he opted toward turning to the front where Wilbur was standing beside Phil watching the screen. Beside him, Tommy was babbling on about something that Wilbur seemed to only be half-listening to. On the other side of Phil, Schlatt was standing with his arms crossed whispering something and sending them blank looks every so often. George kept a close eye on him.

“Alright, welcome every handsome lad and Niki to the meeting,” Wilbur announced to gain everybody’s attention. “We are gathered here today to—”

“Dude, this isn’t a wedding. Just get on with it,” Fundy called out, getting several nods of agreement and a few chuckles from the others.

Rolling his eyes, Wilbur pointed toward Phil, “Take it away, Phil!”

He retreated to sit in one of the front seats. Tommy followed behind still blabbering. In response, Wilbur shushed him and told him to sit down which Tommy refused with a big pout until Wilbur forcefully pulled him onto the chair next to him.

“Ooookay.” Phil cleared his throat and pulled up his presentation which made George feel like he was sitting back in Ms. Lamar’s class staring at her endless slides in boredom. “Let’s just jump straight in. Our goal is taking down Project Salvida which I reckon you three must have heard of?”

“That sketchy org that keeps showing up on TV?” Dream asked. “The one Mark Bryan is president of?”

Phil pointed at him and nodded. “Exactly. Project Salvida is a nonprofit so-called humanitarian public service and advocacy group.”

Tommy scoffed. “Because supporting companies that purposefully get mods hooked on drugs is *so humanitarian* of them.”

“Can you shut up for one second, Tommy? We’re getting there,” Wilbur said.

“I’m just saying those bitches deserve—”

Phil continued with his presentation like Wilbur and Tommy weren’t still bickering in the front row. He changed the slide to an image of a map of the neighborhood with highlighted sections marked into groups labeled businesses, parks and landscape, housing, and more.

“They’re currently trying to approve their ‘Long Live Queen Anne’ urban planning project which involves significantly renovating the neighborhood,” he emphasized by pointing to the floor, “to include more businesses, improve outdoor community spaces to be more environmentally friendly and reconstruct the majority of the housing.”

“Isn’t that sorta good?” Skeppy asked.

“Oh please,” Tommy said and slammed his fist on the table. “Bryan couldn’t pull off anything good even if he found a woman to—”

Wilbur ignored Tommy. Instead, he stood up and pointed toward Skeppy. “Glad you asked! Phil, I can take it from here,” he said as he performed a smooth 180 with a shining smile like he was readying to present the next big invention of the century.

“What’s the problem, you ask? I’ll tell you what the problem is.” He pressed on to the next slide which was a color-labeled diagram map shaded with percentages of the normal population versus the Extramundane population in the city. “This neighborhood has historically been home to huge populations of EMs.” The next diagram showed average incomes in Seattle neighborhoods. “It’s also historically one of the poorest neighborhoods around. Now, Project Salvida claims to be doing the city a favor by improving infrastructure and funding in this neighborhood. The problem is they are completely ignoring the issue of rising property values. In other words—”

“They’re planning to gentrify the neighborhood,” Dream finished for him.

“Aha!” Wilbur slammed his little control on the table. “Now Phil’s been trying to work through his connections to address the issue but Project Salvida is a big organization supported by the majority of the politicians—”

Tommy made a gagging noise.

“— here so we haven’t gotten anything done. Everyone’s turning a blind eye at the destruction of our neighborhood and we won’t let that happen. So we’re planning to infiltrate their convention this week and expose them live in front of the whole city. And with that debriefing, what have you got to say? Are you in?”

There was a pause and then Skeppy raised his hand.

“Yes, young gentleman in the back?”

“I only caught onto half of that so...”

Behind George, Technoblade’s huff caught the attention of everyone in the room. “A rich company supports expensive neighborhoods that poor EM families can’t afford and will end up on the streets because of. And nobody’s doin’ anything about it.”

“Ohhh.” Skeppy nodded in understanding.

“We’re in,” Dream said after that.

George shifted uncomfortably in his seat. At the front of the room, he made eye contact with Schlatt who had been leaning against the monitor throughout the whole presentation with his arms crossed and a blank stare fixed on him. It made all the hairs on his arm stand up.

“Brilliant news,” Tubbo exclaimed.

With his lips pressed tight, George sent Dream a look that clearly shouted, *we need to talk about this first*. Yet Dream disregarded him, making it clear that he was still angry about their argument.

You might as well just leave.

Scowling, George’s chair scraped the floor when he stood up. Everyone turned to him. “I need some fresh air,” he said before walking out of the room while trying not to make his angry aura obvious.

The last thing he heard before walking out was Tubbo’s voice turning soft when he asked, “Was it something I said?”

Outside, the air was frigid and humid against his face. The sky was shrouded in darkness and the moon was hardly visible behind the blanket of grey clouds. The only lamp in the alleyway flashed on and off at random intervals and painted his shadow on the wall. He hugged himself and rested the back of his head against the brick wall. His hearing focused on the soft buzzing of the flickering lightbulb.

The clouds growled in the distance and a single raindrop hit his nose. George breathed out and wished he could turn back time to their night at the lake. Or at the hotel, cozily settled inside Dream’s embrace. Or even back at the cruise deck, watching the million stars above them. He looked up and realized there wasn’t even a single speck in the sky. Instead, the galaxy was shrouded by the cloudy skies and the light pollution of the city.

“George,” a whisper in his ear startled him and he turned to look at the dead-end bricked wall of the alley where his shadow stood.

The light above him flickered faster. From the ground, a shadow began to emerge onto the wall, growing with each flash of the lamp. Arms and legs sprouted from it and then a head. George’s eyes widened. His fists clenched beside him, and his breathing quickened. He was too afraid to look behind him.

“Please,” it pleaded, high-pitched and hushed. “*Let me out, George.*”

Frozen, he watched as the shadow grew bigger and bigger like it was approaching from behind him. The buzzing of the light grew louder inside his ears, the sound vibrating like there was a fly trapped in his ear canal. A few more raindrops hit his arm and cheeks and rolled down his skin. It set off goosebumps all throughout him.

“It’s in your nature, George.”

The shadow behind him engulfed his own. His heart dropped a thousand meters when he felt a presence breathe cold air on the back of his neck. He shut his eyes tight and silently begged for it to go away. His body felt weak and exhausted. He was so tired of everything—feeling like he was on the verge of collapsing.

“Please stop.”

He could hardly hear his own thoughts over the deafening buzz. The rain drops hitting his shoulder. The flickering lights. The ticking echoing closer and closer inside his head.

“Stop it!”

“I can help you. Just let me take control.”

“I can’t,” he shouted and opened his eyes.

Everything stopped.

The alleyway was dark. For a second, the lamp looked like it had burned out above him, but then it flickered to life again, this time remaining on. The buzzing was barely discernible. He looked over his shoulder and realized he was alone. Thunder rumbled in the distance and the rain picked up, drenching his hair and shoulders. The only remnant of the event was the speed at which his heart was racing and the chills he still felt across his neck and shoulders when he rubbed the spot. Had he imagined everything?

The door beside him opened, and Dream poked his head out, frowning. “George? Why are you out in the rain?”

He didn’t respond.

Dream sighed and opened the door wider. “Come on. Let’s talk in here.”

They sat down at the top steps of the concrete stairs. George pressed the side of his head against the metal railing next to him. The light was dim and there was a bug flying around and continuously thudding against the bulb. George almost laughed. It looked as desperate as he felt trying to figure himself out. He wondered if it ever grew tired of following the light. If it ever just considered giving up. Yet, like it hadn’t yet figured out everything was useless, it continued looping around the bulb, dead set on reaching it.

He sighed. The little guy was certainly more resilient than him.

Dream shuffled closer and through his peripheral, he saw him slip off his hoodie and leave on his Nashville t-shirt below. George was confused until he felt Dream drape it over his shoulders.

When George scrunched his eyebrows together and turned to him, Dream said, “You’re soaking wet and you’re shaking.”

He looked down at himself and realized he was right. He slipped off his wet hoodie and replaced it with Dream’s. He tried not to pay attention to his overwhelming scent.

“I don’t want us to fight. We’ve finally made it here, and I know this is hard for you, but you have to admit it’s our best shot at finding Bad.”

George lowered his gaze. He was too tired to think properly. All he wanted to do was close his eyes and forget he was breathing. He was so, so tired.

“These are good people. We have a chance to make a difference and save Bad while we do it. Didn’t I tell you we’d be heroes one day? Well, this is it.”

“That was back when we thought I’d gain control of my powers.”

“Who says you won’t? It might not be by tomorrow or the day after that, but you will one day.” Dream turned away, breathing through his mouth. “You’ve been fighting them for most of your life, George. Maybe... maybe it’s time to embrace them? Have you considered that maybe Sarah was wrong? Maybe AGE was wrong. Maybe the key to controlling them is just letting them be.”

George had.

For a long time, a part of him had questioned why he was doing this. Every time he remembered his mother’s words the day he left, when she had called his abilities a disorder. Every time he relived that moment he levitated a book for the first time, when everyone around him had backed away in terror. Every time he remembered Sarah’s advice about hiding them away and not using them. Every time, he considered the thought that maybe he didn’t need to fear them—that maybe, just maybe, he could learn to live with them for the first time in his life. But he had always rejected that side of him.

Sarah’s story about Aether had only fortified his belief that he had to contain them. That one day, he would be able to control them and tuck them away so well he would forget they exist. That they didn’t need to be a part of his life. That he could be normal if he just tried hard enough. Except Dream had always kept him from truly believing it with his optimistic outlook, and most of all, his hope for George.

Now, yet again, they were here, fighting back and forth on whether it was better to embrace them or deny them. George didn’t blame him. Dream had always been proud of his roots, always adored showing off his abilities and using them for something he saw worth in. But Dream was a Bio-E. He had no idea what it was like to be a Psychic. And he was never going to. No one besides another Psychic could understand the endless struggle.

“I don’t know,” George said.

Sensing he didn’t want to continue talking about it, Dream sighed and settled for putting his arm around George and pressing his head gently on his shoulder. George didn’t stop him. Instead, he blinked his eyes shut.

“Phil is letting us stay in one of the spare rooms,” Dream said. He paused for a moment before continuing. “I told him you hadn’t decided if you wanted to help yet, and he said it was okay. That you could stay the night anyway, even if you weren’t with us.”

George hummed in agreement, feeling himself dozing off.

“We should get you to bed.”

George didn’t respond. He heard Dream say something else, but he was so out of it that Dream sounded fuzzy and distant, and before he knew it, he fell asleep against his shoulder.

“Don’t strain yourself, George.”

He opened his eyes with a gasp. His heart was racing a hundred miles an hour. His whole body felt like it had just been electrified by a lightning bolt. His eyes traced the room quickly until he found Sarah's eyes.

"Breathe," she told him.

He was in the clinic. As he attempted to sit up on the white bed, his head grew dizzy and he held a hand up to his forehead to keep himself from wobbling.

"Steady." She placed a hand on his arm to stabilize him.

"What happened?"

"You passed out during the dance yesterday. Do you remember anything?"

He blinked his eyes shut and remembered. The fight at the beach. Bad and Skeppy having a corn dog eating contest in front of them. Sapnap dragging him to the bouncy castle and then Skeppy turning it off while they were inside. Dream holding his hands as they danced to a lively beat, his smile glistening under the bright beams of the blue moon.

"Only bits and pieces." George rubbed his forehead and whimpered. "My head hurts."

Sarah observed him with a pensive and concentrated look. George could sense she was contemplating something, but he couldn't quite tell what it was. He could only tell apart the tinge of concern in her aura.

"Is there something wrong with me?"

She pursed her lips momentarily and her mouth fell into a thin line. "George, have you been noticing anything different about yourself as of late? Bouts of anger or strong emotions, hallucinations, dizzy spells, nightmares, paranoia, fear, anything abnormal with your abilities or of the sort?"

"I—" Scrunching his eyebrows together, he tried to remember any of the symptoms, but he couldn't seem to come up with anything. "I don't think so? Not besides yesterday."

The intense stare she sent him didn't do much to reassure him.

"Is there something wrong?" he asked again, his voice barely above a whisper.

Sarah sat back and crossed her arms. She tapped the pen in her hand against her clipboard at a fast rhythm. "I'm not quite sure. Yesterday was probably your empathy conflicting with the crowd and the fight must've been the trigger."

She was hiding something. It was obvious in the way she was speaking slower than usual, crossing her legs the other way—narrowing her eyes and thinking so loud. So so loud. He couldn't tell of what, but he felt it. Although Sarah was always careful with her words, she never hid things from George. She was always straight and honest with her feelings.

"Why did you ask if I've noticed anything different?"

Sarah sighed. "They are all onset signs of your abilities evolving."

"But I'm already a Telepath," he said while shaking his head in confusion. "How is that possible?"

She stopped tapping her pen. Her silence made George's stomach feel sick. The sheets wrinkled around his fingertips as he clutched them tightly. "Sarah? There isn't a stage past Type 3 Psychics, is there? There can't be."

After another pause, she uncrossed her legs, sat straighter, and then pushed the frame of her glasses up the bridge of her nose.

"With the inconclusive results you got on your EM evaluation, it's unlikely that—"

He raised his voice. "Is there a higher type that I don't know about?"

Sarah seemed taken aback by the sudden interruption.

"Please answer me." His voice cracked, growing weaker as he spoke, "You never hide things like this from me." He tightened his grip on the sheets.

Sarah took a deep breath. "Look, George. Take things easy for now. We don't know anything for certain. It could just be your current abilities acting out, especially if there's been any recent changes to your routine or relationships or your emotional state. Psychic abilities are tricky to pinpoint. Freaking out is only going to make it worse, so just take it easy and try not to use your powers for the time being until we figure out what's going on. If anything happens at all, I should be the first person aware of it, okay?"

George pursed his lips and stared at her, unblinking. Her gaze was sharp and stern, revealing no outward emotion. He couldn't sense anything abnormal in her aura. Whatever uncertainty and worry that had been present before had now vanished. It frustrated George that he couldn't tell if there was something hidden beneath the surface, but he couldn't pry into her thoughts. Sarah was an expert at blocking him out. He supposed she had to be as she was the only Psychic counselor at AGE. It didn't make it any better though. George just wanted her to tell him what was wrong with him—maybe then he would be able to revert it. Block it out to make sure it would never manifest.

"George," she said, breaking him out of his thoughts.

"Huh?"

"You have to tell me if you notice anything wrong, okay? Try not to worry about it. You could potentially psych yourself out and lose control of your powers. It'll only make things messier if you do so just..." She sighed. "Just take it easy for me, okay?"

George looked at his lap. He rolled the gem on his neck in between his fingers and took a deep breath before replying, "Okay."

George woke up alone in the bottom bunk in a small room with only a dresser and a lamp in sight. As he jerked up and gauged his surroundings, his thoughts gradually came into focus and vague memories of the previous night returned to him: their escape from the hospital, their fight with Al, the Bergman Defenders, his argument with Dream, his encounter in the alleyway...

The memory of the shadow person struck him with a cold stinging on his shoulders and neck, and he had to force himself out of his thoughts to strip away the feeling. He swung his legs over the bed and sat staring at the bare walls of the room with cobwebs overtaking the corners and aged marks on the wooden dresser, making it clear that it had been desolate for a long time. He pressed his bare feet on the cold concrete ground, and he shuffled toward the door that was slightly agape.

Outside, he could hear muffled voices talking and when he opened it, he realized it was the TV in the living room across from his room. As he approached it, he noticed it was a news report recounting what they knew about the fugitives. He clenched his jaw and turned away from it, and he almost got a heart attack when he saw Wilbur with an arm on the kitchen counter observing him with a faint smile and holding a mug that said “Home Home” on his free hand.

“Morning,” he said and took a sip. “Care for some breakfast strudels Niki baked for us?”

George scratched the back of his neck and said, “Um, pass?” He took a look around the empty room. “Where is everyone?”

“They left for the shelter about an hour ago. Only me and Fundy stayed. I was going to go but your friend didn’t want to wake you up so I offered to stay here until you woke up so Phil could show them what we do in our afternoons.”

“You mean you don’t just stir trouble in the streets?” George said without thinking, and his eyes widened at his own blunt joke.

Wilbur didn’t take offense. Instead, he chuckled and placed his mug on the counter. Turning around, he opened the cabinet to retrieve a plate. “Contrary to popular belief, we’re not savages.” He turned and froze, thinking of it for a second. “Well, Tommy is, but everyone else isn’t. Most of the time, anyway.”

George snickered and walked closer. He crossed his arms and observed Wilbur as he took a strudel from a baking tray on the stove and put it on the plate. George’s guard was still up seeing as being in a strange environment with people he didn’t know nor agree with was stressful by itself, but Wilbur appeared harmless. So far, anyway.

“Could you take this to Fundy? He’s in the conference room.” Wilbur handed him the plate. “We’ll leave right after so you can meet up with your friends and see the shelter.”

Taking the plate, George furrowed his eyebrows. “What’s this shelter you keep talking about?”

Wilbur leaned both elbows on the counter and looked up at him with a grin. George found his face getting a little red at the undeniable allure of the guy. He was attractive, that was certain, but there was also a sort of gleam to his aura—big, bright, and bold. It was the only words George could use to describe it.

“It’s called ARRC. Stands for Aid, Recovery, Rehabilitation, and Community shelter. It’s meant to help underserved EM families and homeless EMs get back on their feet. Especially recovering Xelies.”

“Xelies?”

“Xela druggies.” Wilbur nodded along.

“Oh.” Although George had heard of students dealing Xela at the island, he had never actually run into an addict. They had talked about it during one of his Biology classes years ago. His teacher had mentioned how it was originally meant to help Bio-E’s with certain illnesses, but it had ended up turning into an addictive drug that could starve its user and kill them within a few years span. George hadn’t realized it was a big enough problem to warrant a whole shelter dedicated to caring for Xela abusers.

After a second of staring, Wilbur gave a low chuckle and asked, “You want to go take that to Fundy or have you got plans to stand there all day?”

When George realized he was still holding the plate, he gave a shy nod, and he turned around to make his way down the hallway. In the conference room, Fundy was busy on the big monitor typing some intricate code. When George walked inside, Fundy's fingers stopped, his ears twitched, and he sniffed the air. He turned in his rolling chairs and his eyes brightened when he saw the plate.

"Wilbur told me to bring this to you," George said as he handed it over.

Fundy didn't waste a second before gobbling it down almost whole. His eyes closed in what could only be described as an expression of pure ecstasy and he leaned back on his chair, savoring the strudel and then letting out a pleasant groan. George bit back the inappropriate joke at the tip of his tongue he would otherwise use to tease his friends.

"Have you tried these? Niki is literally a blessing from the sky. Best baker in town." He swirled in his chair and set his plate on the table. George cringed when he saw him lick his fingers and then continue his typing.

Curious, George approached and watched over his shoulder. Although he was a pretty good coder himself and he understood a few lines of the code, Fundy had always been past his level of knowledge in programming.

"What are you doing?"

"Testing a code for our mission," Fundy answered as he pulled out a flash drive from the computer and then connected it to the laptop he had on the table alongside his plate. His eyebrows were scrunched together in concentration and the tip of his tongue was slightly peeking out at an angle.

"What does it do?"

Fundy sat back, and after a second, the laptop opened a command script by itself, and lines of code started to run through the screen very quickly. About half a minute later, the script closed itself and Fundy took out the flash drive to plug it into the big computer. When he opened it, there seemed to be a hundred or so folders named Documents, Downloads, Pictures, and such running down the list.

Fundy leaned back and smiled wide, looking pleased with himself. "Downloads all the data from the laptop so we can transfer all the information in less than the time it takes to eat a whole strudel," he replied before eating the other half of his strudel in one bite. He rubbed his hands together to swipe off the crumbs and then looked up at him. "You four have been on quite the mission, haven't you?"

George chuckled and rubbed his arm shyly. "I guess?"

Fundy laughed and shook his head. He turned back to his computer and continued typing. "You got no idea how scared you had everyone at AGE."

"Really?" George frowned.

"Yeah. After some students overhead Skeppy freaking out about Bad being kidnapped, someone started a rumor that you guys were taken because you figured out what happened to him and the others who mysteriously left. The headmaster had to call an assembly and tell everyone they were taken to be treated for some illness."

"Liars," he spat out on impulse.

Fundy halted and raised an eyebrow at him. “Huh?”

Sighing, George rubbed the back of his neck and considered telling him. After thinking of it for a moment, he decided it wouldn't be a risk seeing as they had already agreed to help and from what he knew of Fundy, he wasn't the kind to listen to authority, much less trust in it. Admittedly, it wasn't so surprising that he had joined a group like the Bergman Defenders.

“We found out they'd been taken into some program called Project Delta Z or whatever. The illness thing is just a cover up. That's why we snuck out of the island to come find him. We overheard someone talking to the Headmaster and they mentioned a Seattle facility.”

Fundy raised both eyebrows as George spoke. He crossed his arms and contemplated it for a moment. “That's tough.” He turned back to his program. “You guys certainly have some courage traveling across the country,” he said as he continued typing.

“When did you and Techno leave?”

“We got here yesterday actually. The school dismissed everyone early after the stunt you pulled. You got everyone looking for you.”

George pursed his lips. Gravely aware of that fact, he squeezed his eyes shut momentarily, trying not to think about it so he wouldn't freak out again.

“I don't know how you expect us to pull off a mission in public when everyone knows what we look like.”

Fundy laughed. “Don't worry 'bout that. Wilbur and Niki will take care of it.”

“Hope so...”

“I know I'm pretty great to hang out with, but weren't you supposed to go back to Wilbur or..?”

“Oh, right.” George turned on his heel.

“And George?” Fundy called out before he could leave.

“Yeah?” George turned around in time to see a plate barreling straight for him. He was barely able to stop it centimeters from his face with his levitation and then he picked it up, staring at Fundy with gaping eyes.

Fundy watched him with an amused expression. “Nice catch.”

George scoffed and then left the room. In the kitchen, Wilbur had just finished putting away the strudels and cleaning the counter. He smiled when he saw George approach and asked, “Ready?”

“Do you mind if I just take a shower and change first?”

“Go ahead. Third door to your left.”

With an awkward nod, he returned to the room where he scavenged through Dream's backpack to retrieve another pair of clothes. He spent most of his shower time contemplating what had occurred yesterday and what he was going to do now that Dream and Skeppy were practically sold on the idea of helping the Bergman Defenders. Unable to come up with any ideas, he left the shower disappointed and met Wilbur in the living room. He was on the sofa with a guitar on his lap, tuning and strumming a few chords.

George cleared his throat and awkwardly stood by him.

“Are you ready now?”

“Yeah.”

Setting his guitar aside, he stood up and gestured toward the door with a smile. George made sure to throw on his hood and some sunglasses before they made their way out of the building and into the streets. They were busier than the day before—with kids playing football out on the streets, pedestrians walking with bags on their arms and more cars on the road.

At one point, George took notice of a girl playing with her friends by a fire hydrant. It wasn't so much their loudness that drew his attention but instead the fact the girl was water-bending and drawing shapes with the water out in the open. One of her friends joined in by blowing a gust of wind toward the stream of water and making it sprinkle all over them, causing them all to burst into giggles.

It reminded George of those summer evenings when Dream, Sapnap, and him played Manhunt by the shore when they were younger. Whenever Dream would be the one hunting, Sapnap and George often sabotaged each other's paths to get the other caught. Though, admittedly, even when it was Dream being hunted, they self-sabotaged by accident and Dream often got the best of them and ended up hunting them instead.

“For someone who attends an EM school, you look surprised to see people using their powers,” Wilbur pointed out as they strolled down the sidewalk.

“I've never seen an EM community be so...” George glanced at a group of adults beside an apartment complex with a grill turned on. After taking a sip of her bottle and glancing at the dying fire on the grill, one of the women opened a flame in her palm and reignited it without a second thought. “Open,” he finished.

Wilbur shrugged. “Welcome to Queen Anne.”

As they rounded the corner, George noticed a homeless man sitting beside a bundle of sheets in front of what looked to be a beat-down old-style cinema center. Upon closer inspection, he noticed the bundle move and he realized it was a little girl wrapped tightly in the covers snoozing. Small, brown rabbit ears peeked out of the sheets when she moved to her side. George felt a knot form at the back of his throat as he noticed the sign beside them that read ‘Anything will help please. I only need enough for my daughter.’

Wilbur smiled and greeted the man before he dropped a five-dollar bill in the cup he had set beside them.

“You're a blessing, Will, thank you,” the man's gruff voice replied and he returned the gesture with a smile of a few yellowing, missing teeth.

A few more meters down the line, there was another old woman sitting and holding her cup, the coins clinking every time a pedestrian passed by without much notice. Wilbur dropped some money in her cup too.

“Not what you expected?” Wilbur asked after a few more minutes of walking.

George bit his lip and bunched up his fingers inside his pockets. “I didn't realize there were so many people living like this...”

They passed a dumpster overflowing with plastic bags and paper, bottles, and spoiling food scattered across the ground beside it. A few meters away, there was an old, bricked apartment complex. It was around six floors tall and had a metal staircase leading up the middle in a zig-zag with doors at each level.

Two kids on the third floor were sitting on the balcony throwing paper planes over the ledge and sending them flying with tiny gusts of wind to see how far they could make it. A few of the windows were open wide enough that George could hear the radio playing inside. Other apartments had plant bowls placed on the ledge with vines long enough to reach the ground. There was a small garden on the other side of the building where a person was picking fruit from the trees and placing it in a basket.

“Right, well, not every EM is fortunate enough to live at a special island boarding school.”

George lowered his gaze. He stared at the cracks and missing chunks of the sidewalk as they walked over them. “Have you always lived here?”

“No. I moved here years ago though. Phil took me in.”

Hesitantly, George glimpsed at him and asked, “What about your parents?”

Wilbur snorted and the thin line of his lips widened all the bit. “Sent me away from England to live here with my aunt because they didn’t want to see me. Ran away pretty soon after that. Never looked back.”

George frowned. “Because of your powers?”

Wilbur nodded and raised his palm so that it was facing up. An orb of light grew on his fist and it slowly levitated to follow in front of them as they walked. After a second, it broke away into sparkles of yellow and fizzled off in the light of the early afternoon sun.

“Not an uncommon story around here if I’d say so, and it’s certainly not the worst.”

“That sucks,” George mumbled, unsure of how else to respond.

“Bet you thought we’d be some criminal group with some fancy top secret base and spy gear, right?” Wilbur shook his head and snickered.

George’s faint smile widened. “Not really. But I didn’t think you lived in a place like this or that you were so—” Not knowing how to finish his sentence, his words faded into nothingness.

“Normal?”

“I guess.”

“Most of us are normal. You just haven’t gotten to know us, Gogy.”

George let out an embarrassed snort and raised an eyebrow at the odd nickname. “Gogy?”

Exchanging glances, Wilbur’s smirk widened. “Thought of it just now. Sounds fitting.” He led him across the street to turn another corner. “Have you thought more into helping us? We could really use your help.”

“You’ve made that pretty obvious.” Shrugging his shoulders, he looked to the side to watch a woman who was walking her chihuahua on the other side of the street. As she passed a closed

fence where a bigger dog began to bark and startled her chihuahua, the woman bared her teeth and snarled, frightening the dog into backing away with a submissive stance.

“I don’t know,” George said.

“Really, Gogy? Do you still need more convincing?”

He shrugged again.

“Right, well, maybe this will help convince you.” Wilbur stopped by a building with a sign beside the door that read ARRC Shelter. Opening the door, Wilbur gestured for him to walk in first.

They entered the large cafeteria with scattered tables and a kitchen window on the right side. People were sitting at the tables talking while others were paying attention to the soap opera playing on a large television mounted near the entrance. Two kids were laughing and chasing each other while playing with some animal balloons and making roaring noises. Around the room, there were bulletin boards and healthy eating posters with fun and bubbly visuals pasted on the walls.

“Will, is this another one of your new friends?” a kind-faced woman approached them with a welcoming smile.

When she offered her hand, George hesitantly took it and offered a nervous smile. He looked at Wilbur from the corner of his eye who seemed overly relaxed, and George forced himself to calm down. If she had recognized him from the news, she didn’t show it in her calm demeanor.

“Welcome to ARRC. My name’s Cristie and I’m the owner of this place,” she introduced herself.

“George,” he said with a nod and watched her expression carefully. It didn’t change.

“Cristie! Will!” a little girl ran up behind her, clung to her leg, and looked up excitedly. Upon seeing George, her smile faltered, and she hid behind Cristie’s legs.

“Don’t worry, Molly. George’s not a stranger. He’s just a friend of Will’s.” Cristie smiled warmly and patted the girl’s head.

Molly peeked her head out to glance at George curiously. Hesitantly, she removed herself from behind Cristie and walked closer, like she was inspecting him. “Are you an EM, too?” she asked.

Glancing at Wilbur who only offered George an encouraging smile, he kneeled down to her level and smiled. “I am. Are you one?”

Molly’s eyes brightened and she nodded with excitement.

“What kind of powers do you have?”

She leaned closer and whispered in his ear like it was a secret. “The wind listens to me when I tell it what to do.”

George laughed. The girl stepped back and beamed. “What is your superpower?”

He sent Wilbur an uncertain gaze, but he only gestured for him to show her. He stood back up, and without trusting him, he levitated the discarded balloon the kids who had been playing near them left on the floor and brought it to her. Molly watched with a spark of amazement as the balloon landed softly on her hands. She stared at it for a moment and then asked, “The wind listens to you too!?”

George laughed alongside Cristie and Will, and shaking his head, he replied, “Something like that.”

“Okay, Molly, why don’t we take you back to your mom? George and Will have to go find their friends now,” Cristie said as she took Molly’s hand.

“But I want to talk to Geooorge!”

“Maybe later,” he said, and Molly’s smile widened before Cristie pulled her away.

Smiling, Wilbur slid his hands into his pockets and nodded forward. “Come on, I think I know where your mates are.”

George followed him into another door that opened into a gymnasium the size of a warehouse. There was a crowd shouting, talking, and whistling occasionally gathered further up, and George wasn’t sure what they were doing until he looked up.

On what appeared to be a parkour course mounted high near the ceiling, Dream and Techno were running through, dodging, weaving, hopping over beams, balancing on poles, and hanging over acrobatic swings.

It was the first time George had seen Dream wearing his mask since the cruise. The green hood from his hoodie was up too, and even though George couldn’t see half his face, he could tell he had that look of concentration he did every time he competed during events. His arms and palms were open on his sides as he ran, and every time he jumped, it almost looked like he was flying. He landed on his heels and used the momentum from it to push his body forward, no hesitation as he dashed through the course. George had forgotten how short of breath he got every time he saw Dream like this.

Techno wasn’t much different. Although both of their parkour styles were confident and sure, while Dream was sly and nimble with his movements, pulling off every trick with a cocky smile and often spending more time with his feet away from the platform or back-flipping over obstacles, Techno was more steady and brute-force, his soles flat on the ground and taking huge, strong strides that kept him either one step ahead or behind Dream at all times, his mouth stern, his fists clenched and his arms tense on his sides. His pink braid swung freely from side to side as he ran. While Dream opted toward swinging through the bars, Techno kept himself on the platforms below, his feet landing hard and fast as he pushed through the course.

The crowd watched in awe, their eyes wide and their mouths agape. Some of the kids jumped and shouted “look!” to the people next to them like they weren’t also watching in amazement as the two ran the course.

Wilbur blew out a low whistle as they approached. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen Techno look so determined to win. Usually, he doesn’t have to try too hard.”

“They’ve always brought out that side of each other.” George said.

They joined Niki and Skeppy who were standing at the very back, also watching.

“How long have they been at it?” Wilbur asked when he stepped beside her.

“Twenty minutes now. It’s like they don’t get tired.” Niki chuckled and crossed her arms, turning around and smiling at the both of them. “This is their third lap.”

“Techno and Dream love to compete almost as much as George and Dream love acting all lovey-dovey.” Skeppy slipped his hands in the pocket of his hoodie and turned to grin at him.

George felt his cheeks grow a little warm and he scoffed. Refusing to give Skeppy the satisfaction, he chose not to comment on it. He turned back to the course in time to see Dream and Techno on their last obstacle—a pair of slanted platforms in a zig-zag pattern leading toward the finishing platform. Techno was ahead of Dream by a few steps and as they barrelled toward the end, Dream took the risk and skipped the platform on his left, opting for jumping straight across onto the last platform. The jump gained him one second on Techno. He leaped toward the last platform, and the crowd burst into cheers the moment Dream raised his arms high and exclaimed, “Let’s fucking go!” Techno joined him on the last platform right after.

As the crowd dispersed, they climbed down. George and the others reached the front of the crowd in time to see them reach the ground. Dream slipped off his mask, his hair ruffled and his forehead sweaty, a wide-toothed smirk on display. Techno took off his pig mask and then shook Dream’s hand. He smiled faintly as they kept their gazes locked.

“GG. I really thought you’d gotten rusty on me for a second there. Can’t have my favorite rival makin’ it look so easy.”

“Wasn’t about to let you beat my ass again,” Dream replied with a laugh. George was the first one he noticed when he turned, and he approached him with a cheeky grin.

George rolled his eyes when he stopped in front of him and looked down with a tilted head like he was waiting for praise. As if he needed any more of that. Looking over his shoulder, George noticed Tommy and Tubbo approach Techno.

“What the fuck? Do you have any idea how much money I put on you, Techno? I would’ve won against that asshole in my sleep! Why would you do me like this?”

Techno released a dry laugh and only shook his head at Tommy. Beside him, Tubbo opened his palm and gave Tommy a look, “Hand over the goods.”

“No way, Techno totally lost on purpose to fuck me over!”

“Don’t be a sore loser, Tommy,” Techno said.

“Just give him the money, Tommy,” Wilbur added with a smirk.

Realizing everyone was giving Tommy an expectant look, Tommy scoffed and begrudgingly took out a crumpled dollar bill from his pocket and threw it at Tubbo.

“I hate you all.”

Tubbo beamed and slipped the money in his pocket. Laughing, Dream gave Tubbo a high-five. Niki came up behind him and congratulated him too, also giving him a high-five when he passed. Seeing Dream interact with everyone like they were old friends gave George a funny feeling, and he found himself shying away.

Eventually, Dream turned his attention back to George and raised his palm so he could get a high-five too. George only raised an eyebrow at the motion.

“Oh come on. You can’t say I wasn’t awesome up there.”

“Okay. You weren’t awesome,” George replied, trying to keep himself from smiling.

Dream laughed. His hand was still in the air waiting for George to high-five him. “Stop being an idiot.” He stared at George expectantly. “Don’t leave me hanging here.”

George rolled his eyes and finally high-fived him. Dream's grin widened as he did, and he interlocked their fingers. Pulling their hands down and swinging them together, Dream stared at him with a dumb smile that made George's stomach do acrobatics.

"Hey Will, Phil said to go see him after George got here," Techno said.

"Right, well," Wilbur turned away from his conversation with Niki and Tubbo. "Let's make it quick. I'm already starving." He motioned for Dream, George, and Skeppy to follow him out.

Dream and George held hands the whole way to Phil's office. Beside him, Skeppy elbowed him, and when George looked up, he saw him raise an eyebrow and then glance at their hands. George tried to cover up his blush with a roll of his eyes.

"Phil, my man," Wilbur exclaimed when they barreled into his cramped office.

Phil looked up from his clipboard and smiled when he saw them. He placed the clipboard on his desk and leaned against it with his arms crossed. Behind the desk, Schlatt was sitting on the rolling chair with his legs crossed atop the table and rolling a large, gold coin in between his fingers. He scanned them carefully, his gaze unreadable. George hated the sensation of being dissected like an insect under a microscope that it gave him.

"What did you want to see us for?" Dream asked.

"Well, first, how are you lads liking the place?"

Dream's face brightened instantly. "It's amazing. I didn't realize places like this even existed. Especially knowing what you guys do, it just seems like a dream come true."

"Already sounds like you love the place, huh?" Schlatt added. He pressed his thumb on the edge of the coin and flipped it. George's eyes remained glued to it as he watched it fly in the air and then clink against the hardwood desk. It spun rapidly, the reverberating sound in the air feeling like a vibrating needle slowly perforating his ear drum until it came to a halt, revealing the side profile of a woman. George didn't recognize it as any country's currency.

When he looked up, he noticed Schlatt's intrigued stare fixed on him. George looked away, though he felt Schlatt's gaze remain.

Dream rubbed the back of his neck and offered a shy smile. "I've just always admired what you guys do."

"So glad to hear that, mate." Phil returned the smile. "Say, Wilbur, have you told them about the party Cristie's throwing?"

"Party?" Skeppy raised both eyebrows.

Leaning his foot on the wall, Wilbur crossed his arms and grinned. His hair fell over his eye when he tilted his head and replied, "Right. Cristie's been planning a community party for today. Why don't you guys come? I'm sure you'll find it very fun."

"I'm not really a party person—" George started.

"We're in!"

George sent Dream a glare which he responded to with a confused glance.

Phil chuckled. "Have you decided if you're going to be joining us tomorrow, George?"

George pursed his lips.

"Gogy isn't convinced yet, but no problem," Wilbur said. "I'm sure we'll get him on our side soon enough."

"Gogy?" Dream asked. George's cheeks warmed up when he noticed the puzzled frown Dream sent him. Though, admittedly, he enjoyed hearing the hint of jealousy in his tone.

Pushing away from the wall, Wilbur continued talking, "Why don't we go get some lunch?"

"I second that." Skeppy raised his hand. "Niki's strudels were delicious and all, but I'm really hungry."

"You lads go on ahead."

Before they could walk out, Phil called Wilbur back into the room.

"Go. I'll join in a minute," Wilbur told them before walking back inside the room and shutting the door behind him.

Standing outside the door for a moment, Skeppy said, "What do we do now?"

"Yo, big man," Tommy called from one of the cafeteria tables in the center. Beside him, Tubbo was waving his hands very high and very obvious with a big smile.

Shrugging, Dream nodded for George and Skeppy to follow him over there.

"So, Big D," Tommy began, his expression breaking out into a smirk. Dream winced at the unexpected nickname and George had to hold in a snicker at his embarrassment. "I've heard you've got a reputation at your fancy schmancy school?"

"Techno says you're one of the coolest mods at the school!" Tubbo perked up.

Taken aback, Dream replied, "He said that?"

Meanwhile, George scoffed and rolled his eyes, knowing it would only serve as another boost to his already gigantic ego. Skeppy seemed to agree when he said, "Careful. You'll wake the ego beast."

"Oh please. I'm just surprised is all," said Dream with a huff.

"Right," George muttered with another roll of his eyes when he noticed the grin Dream was trying to contain. "Last time someone complimented how you did in the championship, you talked about your strategy nonstop for three hours."

"Oh, *come on*," Dream pouted. "You're exaggerating."

George raised both eyebrows. "Sapnap literally set your backpack on fire and you didn't realize until like fifteen minutes later."

Before Dream could refute, Tommy cleared his throat. "Okay, okay, enough about that." He clasped his hands together and leaned forward with his elbows on the table. "Look, Big D, I've heard you've been liking our little group. And guess what? It's your lucky day!" He extended both arms and showed off his boastful grin. "I happen to be the only reason the Bergman Defenders

exist.”

Dream raised a doubtful eyebrow.

“It’s true,” Tubbo added.

“See?” Tommy’s grin widened. “I’m kind of a big deal around here you know. I know it looks like Phil’s the one pulling the strings but—”

“Wait but isn’t Phil the one pulling the strings? He’s the leader, isn’t he?” Tubbo looked confused.

Tommy turned to him with annoyance but then cleared his throat and continued. “Look, Phil might be the leader but I’m his right-hand—”

“But I thought Schlatt was his right-hand?”

At Tommy’s glare, George struggled to contain his laughter, though Skeppy made his amusement obvious by cracking up. Dream was still staring at Tommy with an arched eyebrow but now accompanied by an amused grin.

“Okay, Schlatt may be Phil’s right-hand man. But I’m the brains—”

“Nah, I’d say Fundy is or Niki actually.” Tubbo paused to think for a moment, ignoring the way Tommy seemed to be on the verge of exploding right next to him. The duo were certainly entertaining to watch. “Maybe even Techno or Wilbur for sure.”

“Tubbo,” Tommy grumbled under his breath.

“Yeah?” Tubbo blinked innocently, though George could see the slight smile threatening to come through and the gentle waves of playfulness in his aura.

“Do you mind?”

“So what you’re trying to say is you’re not really that big of a deal compared to everyone else?” Skeppy sent him his signature troublemaker grin that George had strangely missed for the past couple of days. Although George was glad he seemed to be a lot more open here (probably because he knew Skeppy and Techno had a strange friendship and he probably felt more comfortable around him), it also made him uneasy because it meant both his friends had a low chance of backing out of the proposition.

“Oh, you little bitch,” Tommy muttered with a glare. “I’ll have you know—”

“I think Tommy’s trying to say that we want you to join us!” said Tubbo.

The table fell silent. George’s stomach fell when he saw Dream’s expression brighten at even the thought of being a part of their team—of staying here.

“Seriously?”

“Phil’s been talking about taking more members for months now! You guys would be perfect for the job!” Tubbo continued.

“I’ll pass on that. This doesn’t really seem like my thing,” Skeppy replied with a shrug.

Tubbo sent Dream a hopeful look. “Dream?”

A smile spread wide on his face, and he opened his mouth to reply until he noticed George's frown. His mouth shut, and more hesitantly, he said, "Maybe one day."

"I'm sure we could find some use for you," Tommy said. "Maybe as my back-up or something. I'll obviously be the one in charge."

Dream snorted. "Right, of course. "

After a moment, Tommy eyed George with a raised eyebrow. "What about you, GeorgeNotFound?"

"Not found?" George asked.

"All the country's looking for you. Not found? Get it? George *NotFound*?" Tommy leaned back in his chair and smirked. "I reckon that if I just walked up to a random civie on the street and said 'Did you know that I'm friends with GeorgeNotFound?' they'd instantly shit their pants. You'd be a good addition to the team for that. Somewhat badass, if you ask me."

George couldn't say that he agreed, especially because people fearing him was the last thing he wanted, but it was also obvious that it was Tommy's way of complimenting him—as weird of a compliment as it sounded.

"Would you want to join us, George?" Tubbo asked.

"It's not really my thing."

Seemingly showing up out of nowhere, Techno slumped down on the chair next to Skeppy. "Phil sent me to make sure you're not scarin' away the guests." He sent Tommy and Tubbo a questioning gaze and then turned to the three of them. "They're bein' annoying, aren't they?"

"For sure. Especially Tommy," Skeppy replied.

"You know, I'm starting to think you have something against me, eh, what was your name again? Can't say you're the most noticeable in your crew."

"Ouch." Skeppy snickered and shook his head, not offended by the insult.

"Tommy, I don't really think you wanna get on Skeppy's bad side. Last time I saw someone mess with him, poor guy ended up with half his tail feathers gone," said Techno.

Dream burst into cackles and clapped his hands together. George joined him in his fit of laughter too when he recalled the drama that had unfolded the year that swan shifter messed with Bad and Coach Harris forced him to shift in class only for him to end up flashing his naked pink butt and perform the walk of shame on the platform. Needless to say, later that day, Bad had scolded Skeppy for the prank he had pulled on the poor shifter even though George had seen him trying to contain his laughter all throughout the class period.

Skeppy shook his head and looked off with a smile like he was reliving a fond memory. "Ah, yeah, the unpluck-the-chicken prank. Classic."

Wilbur joined them soon after and looked across the table in confusion. "Have you not gotten lunch yet?"

Tommy scoffed. "We're not fucking babysitters, Will."

“You’re clearly also not good hosts. I thought at least you’d be a little more receptive with our guests, Techno.”

Techno let out a dry chuckle. “You realize I’ve known these guys for years? This one, especially. Can’t say I like him very much.” He signaled toward Skeppy.

“Nah, Techno totally loves me.” Skeppy grinned and moved closer like he was about to give him a hug but Techno pulled back and glared.

Raising an eyebrow, Wilbur didn’t comment on it. Instead, he looked toward Dream and George. “Alright, well, Dream? Gogy? Do you two want some lunch?”

George felt the instant Dream’s aura shifted from a more amused tone to adopt a more bitter feel. Glancing at him from the corner of his eyes, George saw him tense his shoulders and his smile turn smaller. “Lunch sounds good,” Dream replied, though his voice was strained.

Wilbur took no notice of it. Instead, he clapped his hands and grinned wider, “Alright then, let’s eat.”

The laughter of children across the field made George’s heart feel warm and airy, especially as he watched Dream take the little girl, Molly, onto his back and zoom around with his arms extended pretending to be a plane. With her eyes squeezed shut and her arms wrapped around his neck, she cackled and showed off her missing teeth. Two other little kids followed behind with equally big beams on their expressions. For a second, Dream glanced at George, his eyes and smile twinkling with such delight it made a smile spread wide across George’s face.

Though at the same time, he felt guilty. Mostly, it was because he knew this kind of environment was everything Dream had dreamt of, helping people, making them smile, and brightening their lives. George knew that Dream would’ve accepted Tommy and Tubbo’s offer in a heartbeat. But he had only hesitated because of George. Because he knew it wasn’t the place for George, but it was certainly the place for him. And it left George dreading the possibility that Dream would decide to stay after everything was over—stay in this bright and beautiful community where there was no place for George. He was trying not to think about it, but looking through the space and seeing everyone’s faces made it difficult.

They were happy.

Even in between all the exhausted buildings and impoverished conditions, George had never seen such a happier group of EMs. A man in a clown suit entertaining the little ones while he juggled some fire sticks with his bare hands. An old woman in her wheelchair growing and weaving flower crowns for a line of kids. A guy sitting in between the fountain and the cooler shaping ice sculptures with his hands for everyone.

Across the field, Phil and Cristie were chattering with every person who passed by to pick up a plate of food. Nearby, Tubbo was playing with some younger kids who watched in awe as he raised streams of waters into the shape of animals from a bucket of water on the ground. Beside him, Tommy had his arms crossed and was pretending to roll his eyes like he was too old for their games. However, his expression soon shifted into an excited smile after a little boy approached him to ask him something. Almost instantly, he jumped onto the railing of the bleachers and did a handstand among some other cool tricks that soon had the kids cheering. A splash of water hit him in the face and he almost lost his balance, though he caught himself and yelled at Tubbo who was laughing. Soon, Tommy was chasing Tubbo across the field (though George had a feeling he was

holding back considering he knew Tommy was even faster than Dream after the little race they'd had on their way here).

The vibrant music was booming across the baseball field beside the elementary school. From every direction, people were arriving and departing. Some greeted their neighbors and families with huge beams while others' laughter echoed through the bleachers. The scent of hot dogs and hamburgers whiffed through the air. It was surreal: witnessing such an animated community breathing life into the decrepit and old infrastructure.

"Bad would love this," Skeppy said from the chair next to him.

George turned to regard him with curiosity. They hadn't really had a conversation since the day at the bus, and frankly, it didn't surprise George. It wasn't so much that there was tension between them. It was more so that George and Skeppy weren't super close. If anything, out of their group of friends, Skeppy would be the one he considered himself to be the least closest to. Bad and Skeppy were attached at the hip most of the time and half their year even jokingly used their Skephalo ship name. Sapnap and Skeppy had always been a chaotic pair, especially when they pulled off jokes on people together (God forbid to be the victim of one of their pranks). Dream and Skeppy weren't as close, but they both certainly shared an odd positive spark that naturally drove people closer to them.

It wasn't until this trip that they had really all been forced to face their dark sides. Even if it had been stressful, George felt strangely closer to them despite it all. Perhaps it was true that traumatic situations made you bond with people.

"Maybe he'll want to come back one day. I can't say I see myself being a part of a whole vigilante group, but I know he'd be happy to pay everyone a visit. Especially when he meets them all," he continued, lowering his gaze and smiling faintly.

George smiled too and turned back to watch the crowd. "I think so too. You should bring him. After you graduate from AGE and everything, I totally see you guys traveling the world together."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Skeppy's smile widen. "Yeah, I'd like that."

Fundy approached them a little while later and slumped down on the chair on the other side of George munching on a bag of berries. "You guys just planning to sit here?"

"I don't see you doing much but stealing food off people's plates," Skeppy replied with a snicker.

"I don't technically steal. They offer after I ask."

"That sounds like peer pressure," George pointed out.

Fundy huffed and threw another berry into his mouth. "Technicalities, man."

"I haven't seen Techno around," Skeppy said. "Or that weird dude who's always in a suit."

"You know Techno hates parties. He's probably out pretending he's a spy and reciting Sun Tzu lines somewhere or something." Fundy laughed. "And Schlatt?" He raised an eyebrow and munched on his berry for a moment. Then he shrugged. "He doesn't show up to parties too often. I actually don't know him that well. He joined the gang a few months ago, and he's really only close with Phil and Wilbur. Man's great at talking for a Psychic but he's not very open about his personal life."

George's stomach dropped. His head turned so fast he got a cramp on the side of his neck.

“Psychic?”

“Yeah, he didn’t tell you?”

George shook his head.

“What type is he?” Skeppy asked.

Fundy thought hard about the question and replied, “I think I heard Phil mention once that he was just telekinetic. Him and Schlatt go way back, so I’m pretty sure that’s right.”

Although he had a vague suspicion that Schlatt could be a Psychic, George found himself feeling a bit more unsettled by the confirmation. Especially because of the way he had stared at George like he knew something since the moment he had stepped into Sleepy HQ. George had almost wanted to ask, but honestly, he was a little scared of Schlatt even though he seemed overly charismatic. Though his kind of charisma wasn’t like Wilbur’s bright character. It was more so that Schlatt seemed like he knew how to get into people’s heads. But at least knowing he was only a Type I made George feel a little more relieved.

“Gogyyy,” Wilbur’s pleading voice called out in front of him.

George turned to see him approaching with a drink in hand and a big smile. Wilbur put his plastic cup on the table behind George and offered him a hand.

“What?” George looked confused.

“Dance with me!”

“Uh, I don’t dance...”

“Just one song. Nothing wrong with two mates getting it down on the dance floor.”

George’s cheeks grew hot. “Oh my god, why would you say it like that...” He rolled his eyes but ultimately took Wilbur’s hand.

Fundy whistled as Wilbur pulled him toward the center of the field where there were people of all ages dancing to the pop music. He laughed as Wilbur started doing some weird rickety movements with his arms and legs. Then George started lightly swaying to the beat when Wilbur accused him of not trying.

A few minutes into Wilbur’s dumb ‘dancing,’ they bumped into Niki in the crowd who cackled at Wilbur’s moves and then signaled for George to come closer. In between the loud music, she shouted into his ear. “I think you should probably stop dancing with Wilbur and go invite Dream to dance or something. He looks like he’s about to murder Wilbur.” She pulled away with a giggle.

George looked through the crowd and spotted Dream across the field staring at them with a grimace. George laughed when he saw him and nodded at Niki before heading out of the dance floor.

Dream’s gaze remained fixed on him as he walked, and when he saw his frown widen into a smirk, George rolled his eyes.

“Stop looking like you’re about to beat up Wilbur.”

Dream snorted and grabbed onto George’s wrist when he was close enough. He pressed his nose

into George's hair like he was smelling it. It sent shivers down his neck and arms. "I don't know, Gogy, he's making it really hard not to."

George swallowed. He debated whether they should talk now or later. He wasn't sure a neighborhood party was exactly the place to confess his undying romantic feelings for his best friend. He decided it was a definite no as soon as he heard Dream's next question.

"Have you decided if you're going to help us tomorrow or not?"

Simply hearing the word "us" like Dream was already a part of their group filled his stomach with dread. He turned slightly away from Dream to instead watch as the people shouted and danced to the music.

According to Phil, this was their purpose—protecting these people. People who were already underserved and pushed to the slummiest parts of the city. Parents who clearly worked day and night to provide for their families. Children with huge smiles whose only concern should've been to decide whether they wanted a blue or a red balloon, who didn't deserve to be hunted and targeted for a part of them that made them special. A community inclined toward spreading positivity even though they had only ever been handed dirt all their lives.

They didn't deserve it—that was a given. But at the same time, choosing to help a wanted vigilante group would be the biggest risk of their whole mission. They risked being caught and being sent to prison. They risked being seen as criminals, this time for real, and being shunned by society forever. They risked their whole lives. And more than anything, George risked being sent away into a facility for life if he lost control. There was no turning back.

Across the field, George recognized the little hybrid girl with rabbit ears arriving at the party holding her father's hand, the one who Wilbur had given money to earlier that day. The father smiled wide after greeting Phil with a handshake. Cristie knelt down to the girl's level and caressed her cheek. The little girl looked up at her and then smiled bright when she received a plate of food that she instantly dug into.

George's stomach grew more and more nauseous as he watched the scene unfold. He couldn't help but think back to the girl at the diner—the one they hadn't saved. The one that they had deserted during her hardest time. Then he thought of the boy at the cruise. The way his shoulders trembled while he sobbed beside the pool, probably reliving the slurs and his own friends who had run away from him, wondering what he had done wrong.

The music stopped, and turning to the crowd in the field, he saw Wilbur by the DJ with a microphone. "Let's get this light show started," he shouted, and the crowd cheered.

Handing the microphone off to the DJ, he rubbed his hands together and jumped off the small portable stage to walk toward the middle of the field where a gap was forming in the crowd and only a few people were stepping inside of.

Shortly after, the ten people in the middle settled themselves in a circle and opened their palms. The fairy lights hanging all around the field flickered and slowly lost their brightness. Gusts of dazzling energy circulated the air until it settled into football-shaped orbs of light that looked like pretty stars in their hands. They began to rise above the Photomentals' hands, floating up toward the center of the circle and converging into one huge sun.

The crowd around them cheered when they witnessed the beautiful light that brightened the whole field in the dim light of the real sun setting behind the horizon. And in a split second, their own sun exploded into millions of twinkling sparkles that rained over them like pixie dust. George's breath

hitched. Everyone burst into cheers and kids dashed through the field trying to catch the descending light.

“Wow,” Dream whispered. George turned to him and noticed the white sparks glittering in the gold of his eyes as he watched the gleaming rain. “It’s beautiful.”

George turned back to the scene and swallowed. His fists clenched and he took a deep breath.

George wasn’t a hero. His only goal so far had been saving one of his best friends. In a society that loathed people like him, he had learned to be selfish—as did many Psychics who either hid amid the crowd, stayed silent during injustices, or left everything behind to live a better life. George wasn’t a hero. He had never believed he could be one. But facing the real world and realizing how bad they had it out here, how much they could change, it shifted something in him.

In the back of his head, something pulsed. It was frigid and stern—filled him with a sort of hard determination that both empowered and terrified him. And for the first time, George listened to it. He took a deep breath and then met Dream’s intent gaze.

“I’ll do it.”

Chapter End Notes

Sooo... I recently got my meds changed because I'm seeing a new psychiatrist after spending months searching for a place that diagnoses ADHD and I've been going through some side effects.... also known as Light has completely stopped functioning in her day-to-day and they were barely able to get through revision for this chapter.

With that said, the next chapter is already written and it's almost as long as this one but I'm not 100% sure I'll be able to get through revising it by next Friday but I will try my absolute hardest. There's a slight change to the update schedule beside that which is Chapter 15 is moved to June 4 since MCC is the week of the 21st. Chapter 16 will thus be released on June 11.

I hope y'all enjoyed this chapter. Let me know what were your favorite parts in the comments, they make me so happy to read, especially now while I'm feeling like an utter failure due to executive dysfunction and a myriad of other emotional issues that have gotten so much harder to handle this past week :(

Sinceramente,
Light <3

P.S. I didn't have the energy to write up notes for this chapter so I'm sorry :(

[Also, check out the sbi fic here!](#)

[tumblr](#) & [twitter](#)

Project Salvida

Chapter Notes

As usual, Grav beta-ed this chapter so thank you so much <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"You'll do it?" was the first thing Wilbur asked George the moment he stepped into the kitchen while rubbing the sleep from his eyes and yawning. Wilbur held the fridge open with his hip and a lemonade carton in hand and stared at George, awaiting a response. George stood frozen at the entrance of the kitchen, having been caught off guard. In the living room, Tommy, who was spread on the couch watching a Mission Not Possible movie with Tubbo, overheard and spun to look at them.

"Gogy's gonna join us?" he said, making Tubbo also turn with a big smile and hopeful gaze.

"Dream mentioned it this morning before heading out to help Techno and Phil pick out some supplies," Wilbur said.

"Oh." George pulled his shirt down, took a breath, and said, "Yeah."

On the TV, Ethan Chase jumped off the roof of a building that detonated into a cloud of flames and ashes just as Tommy and Tubbo sprung onto the couch and threw their arms in the air, wooing. George couldn't say it felt like a good sign.

"Brilliant," Wilbur said with a smile, ignoring the two boys dancing in the background. "Phil's probably going to gather everyone so we can go over the plan as soon as they get back which," he looked toward the clock, "should be soon. Would you mind fetching Niki? I reckon she's in the lab." He let the fridge close and took a sip straight from the carton.

"Um, sure, I guess." George turned up his nose and made a note to avoid drinking their lemonade before he backed into the hallway to search for the lab.

The door was half-open when he found it. It was a large room that had a few tables with potted plants ranging all the way from small fruit trees to flowers to even carnivorous plants, all organized into neat lines under a long lamp. The room felt warmer and more humid than the rest of the building when he stepped inside, and he noted the fans spraying mist in the corners of the room.

Niki's back was to him, and she was humming a gentle tune while moving down the rows of plants and watering them. When George approached her, she was tending to a pretty marigold plant like the one she had grown when they had first met her. Although there were a lot of other plants in the room, Niki paid extra attention to the marigold bush in front of her.

She caressed one of its petals and leaned closer to smell it, her eyes closed and her smile distant like she was reliving a happy memory. As he stood at a distance beside her, George felt like he was intruding on a moment, so he cleared his throat to make his presence known.

Niki turned with a questioning gaze and then her smile grew wider, and she said, "Oh, hello, George," and continued down the line to water the next plant.

“Wilbur said Phil’s gathering everyone to talk about the plan.”

“Tell him I’ll be there in a moment.”

George nodded and took a good look around the room. Although there were beakers, microscopes, test tubes, and other obvious lab supplies scattered about on the counters that lined the front and back walls, the room looked more like a botanical garden with the diverse range of plants overtaking the place, some even hanging from the walls and ceilings. He supposed it made sense considering they had two Geos, Niki and Phil, in their team.

“What is this place?”

“Originally it was the spare room that we used as a lab for one of our missions. Now I just use it as a garden room. Nobody around here seems to care about making this place look nice, so I had to take it upon myself to remodel a little.”

“It looks great,” George replied while strolling between the tables, examining every individual plant, many of which had little note cards with unique names and information about how to care for them. He stopped in front of the marigold which was sitting on a pedestal at the center of the room. “You like marigolds?”

“They’re my favorite.”

George nodded and continued his walk. “Any reason why?”

Niki stopped and adopted a pensive look for a second. “They remind me of an old friend,” she settled for saying before continuing her watering. Detecting the faint waves of regret and nostalgia mixed within her aura, George presumed that the term “old friend” didn’t quite capture the nature of that relationship.

“That’s nice...”

George settled by the sink in the back and propped himself against counter, listening to the gentle humming of the fans and the hushed mist hissing in the background. As he admired the vibrant colors across the room and the blossoming golden treasure at the center, he took it as an opportunity to breathe in the refreshing breeze and the intoxicating scent of greenery.

Yet even now, surrounded by serenity and florescence, the tension gripping his body refused to leave. Here was George pledging to take as little risk as possible during their objective to save Bad now agreeing to work with a group of c-list vigilante heroes while they were on the run. George knew this choice would end with terrible consequences, yet at this point, he wasn’t sure a good ending for him existed at all. It felt like he had known it all along.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Huh?” George pried his gaze from the marigolds and looked toward Niki.

She peered at him with her head tilted and a curious smile, and she set her watering can on the table and said, “You and Dream. Are you two like...” She raised her eyebrows, and her smile grew a little wider and a little more teasing. Her aura roused with playfulness.

His face baked amid the humidity. “Is it obvious?”

She chuckled. “Phil was shocked when Techno told him you guys weren’t dating. Then Tommy and Tubbo made a bet on when you’d get together.” Then she sent him a questioning gaze. “Why

haven't you?"

George pursed his lips and his shoulders slumped when he backed further into the counter. He wasn't sure he could answer that considering he didn't understand it himself. It was funny, really. George was an empath, and here he was having feelings for his best friend and not even being certain if he shared them, though it was more so that he wasn't sure he wanted to find out.

Dream and George had been best friends for so long, only getting closer as they grew older. It was scary—muddling a friendship like that with something as outlandish as love.

"It's weird."

"I see." Niki scanned his face for an extra second, her expression turning more serious, before she picked up her can again and continued her task. "Well, take it from someone who knows *weird*, I think you should tell him."

"What?" George replied in an instant.

Niki laughed and looked at him the way one would a kid (these feelings certainly made him feel like one). "You guys are so funny. It's obvious you both like each other. Why don't you just go for it?"

"It's just..." George reached up and started toying with his pendant, contemplating the question. "There hasn't really been enough time, and, well..."

"Haven't you two been friends for years?"

"Yeah, but I didn't realize he like... might like me that way until recently, I guess." The words felt wrong coming out of his mouth, and he recognized then what he had been denying to himself all along. From the moment they had awoken in each other's arms. From the moment they had stepped foot on the cruise. From the moment he had rejected Dream that day at their tree because he didn't think it was possible, even though a part of George knew, deep down, what Dream's "I love you" had meant for both.

George had always felt like a coward, but now more than ever, it felt like it was tearing him away from the most important person in his life.

"So? Why didn't you tell him?"

"Being a fugitive doesn't really give you a lot of time for conversations like that."

Niki stifled a laugh. As she finished tending her plants, she set her can down and walked toward the front, stopping beside the marigold once more to admire it with a reminiscing smile.

"George. If you don't tell him how you feel now, you might not get another chance for it." With an elongated sigh, she grazed her fingers against the marigold's petals. "Then you'll spend your time imagining what could've been and regretting the time you lost avoiding it."

George gave his pendant another squeeze and then let it go, burying his hands in his pockets instead. He knew she was right. But they were on the brink of saving Bad, and he didn't think that now was the right time. He wasn't sure he ever wanted it to be the right time.

"I'll think about it."

For a moment, Niki stared like she could see through his lie, and his instinct urged him to block her

off before he assured himself that she wasn't even a Psychic. He knew she couldn't read his mind, yet he wasn't sure how she could strip him bare with a single look. She let go of the petal and just as she was about to speak, Fundy poked his head into the room, his nose turning up and his ears doing a little twitch.

"What are you guys doing? Phil's waiting on you."

"Right," George cleared his throat and pushed himself from the counter.

Niki glance at George one more time and seemed to decide she would keep the thought to herself. She gave a sigh and, with another faint smile, said, "Let's go."

They huddled around the table that spanned half the length of the conference room to study a map of the headquarters building for Project Salvida. Phil was positioned at one end of the table while Wilbur was at the other end, and the rest sat lined across the sides save for Fundy who was watching on from his chair at the computer and Schlatt who was looming a few steps behind Phil, inclined on the mainframe desk.

"First. We need to talk about disguises," Phil said and looked toward George, Dream, and Skeppy who were all sitting beside each other on one side.

"The whole country's got it out for you three, so we have to make sure we keep you out of the spotlight."

Dream raised his hand, and when Phil gestured for him to speak, he said, "I think George might be better off at the ballroom with you guys."

The dread that overwhelmed his gut immobilized George. That certainly didn't sound like a good idea.

"Why do you say?" Phil said.

"He can hypnotize people," Skeppy replied.

"Hypnotize?" Wilbur said.

Everyone's eyes fell on George, and he shrunk into his chair, fixing his gaze on the large square in the middle of the map labeled 'Ballroom.' He pressed his lips tight and replied, "I don't know. I discovered it recently. It's like I can," his words felt scrambled, and he swallowed his spit and felt his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth before he mumbled, "get into people's heads and distract them, I guess."

There room fell silent for enough time to trigger George's fight or flight, but he clung to the sides of his chair and refused to look up at them.

"What type did you say you were again, George?" Phil asked.

"Type III Psychic..?"

Phil didn't respond. His aura seemed conflicted, and George couldn't help but wonder if he knew something. George's gaze swept over the map to land on him, and he tried probing his mind on it, but there was something blocking him.

“Type III’s are telepaths, aren’t they?” Tubbo said.

“Yeah, I’ve never heard anything about hypnotization,” Tommy added. “I reckon he could be one of those—”

“I agree with, Dream,” Schlatt said, the sudden volume of his voice startling George. Tommy shut his mouth. It seemed like a first considering how talkative the boy was. George traced Tommy’s eyesight back to Schlatt who was observing Tommy with an unreadable stare that bothered George. Yet, somehow, he was still too afraid to try to read him.

Schlatt cleared his throat, and when he pressed his hands together, a flicker of light reflecting on the coin he was holding broke through his fist. George looked away.

“I think we should put George with Wilbur and reposition Niki with Tommy as a waitress.”

Phil sighed and took one last look at George before replying, “Alright. Skeppy, you’re with Dream and Techno.”

“Uh, why exactly do I have to babysit these two?” Skeppy asked.

Techno eyed him from the chair beside him and snorted. “Do you mean why do we have to babysit *you*?”

Skeppy stuck his tongue out.

“You three have the most important task,” Phil said. “Getting into that office and plugging the flash drive into Bryan’s computer. Fundy and Tubbo will be the ones guiding you through coms.” He tossed the flash drive onto the map.

“Uh, so we just have to connect it, right? Nothing else?” Skeppy said.

“The flash drive is programmed to download every file in the computer you connect it to. I spent months perfecting it,” Fundy announced with a proud grin.

“And that is why he hasn’t got a girlfriend,” Tommy pointed out. It earned a laugh from most people at the table, including George.

Fundy glared at Tommy.

“Haven’t you said you’d marry your computer if you could, Fundy?” Tubbo added in a pensive tone.

Scoffing, Fundy crossed his arms. “Irrelevant.”

The table erupted into a clutter of dumb insults and jabs at each other.

“Everyone, focus.” Phil raised his voice. George couldn’t believe he dealt with this daily. Even Sapnap and Dream couldn’t match up to their level of idiot-ness (though it was certainly close).

“Tommy and Niki are going to pose as waiters,” he said and looked toward Tommy with skepticism, “but under no circumstance will they interfere with the plan unless I make the call. Got it? We’ll only ask for you if we have an emergency.”

“Come on, Phil, have you got no faith in me?” Tommy grinned. “I’m a pro at this.”

“A pro at messing us up, that is,” Wilbur added and everyone laughed.

Tommy scoffed and opened his mouth for a rebuttal but Phil beat him to it.

“Wilbur will be with George talking to the guests and making sure the guards stay in their places away from Bryan’s office. If Techno, Dream, and Skeppy are found out, it’s over for us.”

“What happens if the guards find us?” Dream asked.

“The rest will come running.” Phil put his finger on the ballroom and slid it down one of the hallways until he reached the square labeled office. “That’s when we’ll execute our distraction. George and Wilbur are the first line of defense, and if they can’t stop them,” Phil sighed and eyed Tommy. “You and Niki strike.”

Tommy cheered, but Phil’s expression was stern. He pushed himself from the table and crossed his arms, his firm gaze drawing a line across the table.

“And remember, we hurt nobody, alright? Absolutely nobody. Only fight if you’re trapped and need to defend yourself. Otherwise, you run.”

“Where are you going to be, Phil?” Tubbo asked.

“I’ll be with Schlatt. He got me a ticket as a donor at the table by the stage.” He pointed toward the highlighted spot on the map then pointed at the stage. “Schlatt will be next to Bryan when he starts the presentation.”

“Next to him?” Dream raised an eyebrow.

“I work for Project Salvida,” Schlatt said, and George’s jaw dropped.

“You work for them?” Dream exclaimed.

“Where do you think Phil gets all his intel?” Schlatt said and flashed his threatening grin (at least that’s what it felt like to George). “I’m the inside man.”

“But you’re helping them.”

“Look, buddy, I don’t like it any more than you do, but we don’t have many other options here.”

Wilbur said, “Bryan trusts him.”

George stared down Schlatt with hesitation. He didn’t doubt that Schlatt could get an important figure like Mark Bryan to trust him, but what he did wonder is if he was perhaps a little too good at it.

“Schlatt’s the best man for the job,” Wilbur finished.

Then Phil started talking again. “Wilbur and George have the second most important role. After Fundy gets a hold of the flash drive in the truck, he’ll hack into the presentation on stage. Wilbur will sneak out to put on his disguise and be the one to hide behind the curtains and take the mic. The guards will try to get on stage, but George and Schlatt will hold them back.” Phil’s sight scrolled across to look each of them in the eye. “The event’s going to be live on the news, and the whole city will watch us uncover what Project Salvida is doing.”

“What if we fail, Phil?” Tubbo said, frowning.

Phil took a breath and said, “Our priority is that flash drive. If everything else goes wrong, we can form a backup plan, but without that flash drive, we have nothing. Just... try not to get caught, at

least.”

“Hey Dream, can we, um, talk for a moment?”

Dream was in the process of slipping on his black gloves when George approached him after the meeting. Everyone was getting dressed and ready for their part. Dream had put on his Bio-E training suit which George hadn’t even realized he had packed. Admittedly, just seeing him like that again brought back the funny feeling he got in his stomach every time he watched Dream train at the stadium or perform at a competition, not that George would ever let him know. He didn’t want to feed the already gigantic ego he carried around.

“What’s up?” Dream said without looking at him.

George rubbed the back of his neck, and he couldn’t decide where to look at. “I wanted to tell you something,” he said, feeling like he was about to throw up.

Dream froze in the middle of adjusting his sleeves. He finally eyed George with a high eyebrow. George tried to speak, but the words got stuck in his throat.

After standing in silence for what seemed like forever, Dream sighed and took a step closer to face him directly. He put his hands on George’s arms and massaged them. “If this is about your powers, don’t worry George.” He smiled. “I believe in you, remember?”

“I—” George stared up at him with wide eyes, urging himself to spit out the words already, but with Dream’s assured gaze, he didn’t want to bring something up like this all the sudden.

“You got this.” Dream patted him once more on the shoulder and stepped back to hook his mask onto his belt.

“Right,” George muttered, his stomach stinging with resentment toward himself for having wasted the moment.

“Gogy,” Wilbur called from the other side of the room. George turned to spot a chair and vanity mirror he and Niki had set up at the corner of the room, along with the pallets of makeup and brushes lined on the surface. “Ready for your makeover?”

He wasn’t, but he made his way over and sat down anyway. Through the mirror, he could see Niki and Wilbur circling him while studying his appearance. Wilbur threaded his fingers through George’s hair to assess the length and held it there for Niki to examine.

“I’m thinking maybe red?” Wilbur said.

“Yeah and then maybe add a mohawk.” Niki stroked her chin and gave a slow nod.

George’s eyes widened and he sputtered out, “What?” He sent Dream a sheer look of panic through the mirror. Dream sent him that ‘can’t-do-much-about-it’ smile and shrugged before turning to talk to Phil.

Wilbur and Niki shared a laugh.

Wilbur locked eyes with him through the mirror, held onto his shoulders, and leaned over him to say, “Don’t worry, Gogy. We’ll make sure even your mum doesn’t recognize you.”

George wasn't sure that was a good thing.

They turned his chair to face the other way and got working, leaving him to look around the room to avoid focusing on the dreadful sound of scissors snipping and Niki mixing some sort of terrible-smelling cream.

"Hey, Dream," Techno called out from across the room where he was fixing his disguise. He, too, had his mask hooked to his belt. In another universe, George could've imagined they would be fighting for the lead in a theater performance. In the span of a second, he swiped a crossbow from the gear Phil had pulled out earlier and shot an arrow at Dream with the strap of a backpack hooked around the shaft. George's heart dropped as he watched the arrow fly at full speed, but Dream caught the arrow with one hand and took the backpack that was hanging from it.

Dream sent him a glare, though it was paired with a crooked smirk. Techno shrugged and said, "Just testin' your reflexes. Gotta make sure you haven't lost your mojo."

"Oh come on now." Dream rolled his eyes. He threw the backpack on the table by him and let the arrow fall to the ground.

"Is the truck ready yet?" was Tubbo's first question upon stepping into the room with Tommy beside him. The grimace on Tommy's face made George snicker, and he was struggling to adjust the collar of his shirt. He was wearing an ugly blue suit with a frilly white button-up.

Fundy threw a berry into his mouth, twirled in his chair to look at Tommy and Tubbo, and proceeded to choke and spit it out when he burst into maniacal cackles. When Skeppy turned to look at him, he also laughed and said. "You're looking real handsome, Tommy."

"Oh, shut up," Tommy groaned and marched over to Phil who looked busy scrolling his tablet in front of the mainframe. "Hey, Phil, why couldn't I be something cooler? Like maybe a magician or something?"

Phil put down his tablet and started fixing his own suit jacket (which looked a lot sleeker), not even bothering to make eye contact with Tommy.

"Oh yes! I got a top hat you could borrow," Tubbo said and pulled out a black hat from seemingly out of thin air. Everyone paused and stared.

"Why have you got a top hat?" Tommy asked, his mouth and brows twisted with bewilderment. Tubbo winked, spun the hair on his hand, and then put it on.

"Okay..." Phil started, shaking his head and looking away from Tubbo. "We have less than an hour, folks. Hurry up. Tommy, you head out with Niki. Kitchen should be open for you as long as you enter through the back door and scan the ID Schlatt gave you," Phil announced as he finished doing his tie and buttoning up his jacket.

"And we're done," Niki exclaimed and turned George's chair to face the mirror. His expression contorted with pure horror when he laid his eyes on the stranger with hair lighter than Dream's staring back at him.

Wilbur laughed and patted his shoulders. "Don't worry, mate. It'll wear off with a couple of washes."

"What the fuck happened to him?" Tommy came up behind them. "You look like you've turned into that blond 2000s era singer my grandmother used to play every day. Ricky Weaver or some stupid name like that."

George scoffed, turning his attention away from his reflection, then gestured to the extravagantly fancy outfit Tommy was sporting. “What happened to *you*?”

Tommy’s smile morphed into a scowl.

“Are you ready, Tommy?” Niki asked after stripping off the cutting cape on George.

“I’ve been ready. Everyone else is just too slow.” Tommy threw his hands up in frustration and then tried to turn and walk off, but Niki caught his arm and pulled him back, taking him by surprise.

“Hold on.” Niki straightened the red bow tie around his neck and dusted off his shoulders. Tommy groaned but ultimately stood still while she did. When she finished, she took in his appearance with a smile, the kind a mother would give her son, and said, “There we go. Let’s go.” She looked toward Wilbur and George. “We’ll see you two there.”

As they headed for the door, Tommy grumbled something about Niki’s outfit looking better. (She was wearing the same thing save for the frilly shirt being smooth and silky and missing the bow tie, though she pulled it off with a lot more confidence.)

“Don’t let him get behind the wheel or he’ll crash the car,” Wilbur called out, and Tommy turned around to stick out his middle finger. Wilbur looked back at George with a chuckle and asked, “You ready, mate?”

“I think so. Who’s driving us?”

“I am.”

“We’re all set,” Phil said while approaching them.

“Phil, we’re headin’ out in Fundy’s van,” Techno called out from the door.

George turned to see Skeppy and Dream next to him. When Dream locked eyes with him, he quirked an eyebrow at his new look. George tried to keep his face from turning red. The corners of Dream’s mouth turned up, and shaking his head lightly, he gave George a thumbs up. The gesture was supposed to be reassuring, but it only added to the tension across his body. George couldn’t help but think he had made a mistake in agreeing to help, that something terrible would go wrong, but he was too in it to back out now. He could only hope to get a grip on his powers during the event.

“Alright, be careful,” Phil told Techno, and he waved them off as they walked out, leaving only Wilbur, Phil, and George as the last ones. (He hadn’t seen Schlatt since the meeting).

“Are you sure you’ve got it?” Phil asked while handing Wilbur a leather satchel.

“Yeah. I’ve got it.” Wilbur smiled.

“Say, George, when did you realize you could hypnotize people?” Wilbur asked during the ride to the convention.

They were driving through downtown, having left Queen Anne a few minutes ago. The uncracked and bleached sidewalks and dark and smooth roads along with the gleaming glass from the skyscrapers and embellished establishments contrasted the beaten streets of Queen Anne. Yet, even

as they drove past the people wearing expensive brands and more formal attires, their spirit and expressions couldn't compare to the liveliness ingrained in Queen Anne.

"Only recently. Why?" George replied with a curious look, unsure of why it would add any relevance to their mission.

"Did AGE ever suspect it could be something else? Like you were... evolving again? Inexplicably?"

George frowned and pointed his head forward to watch the traffic light ahead. They stopped at a red light, and a woman holding the hand of a little boy with brown hair and a bright gaze passed them. He looked up at his mother with admiring wide eyes like she was his guiding light.

He pulled his gaze away, pressed his head against the seat, and said, "My Psychic counselor did think it was weird, but as far as I know, Psychics only ever reach Type III. Why are you asking? Do you know something?"

Wilbur hesitated, and when George turned his attention toward him, he caught onto the same strangeness he had felt the same day Sarah had told him.

Wilbur took a hesitant pause, and he asked, "Have any other classmates been going through anything similar? Suddenly gaining new abilities or... changing classes altogether?"

George was taken aback. It wasn't something he had ever heard happen nor did it seem like it would be possible. He remembered how his third-year biology teacher had made such a big deal out of it during a test review, emphasizing how EMs could only belong to one class: something about Delta functions and power limitations. George hadn't paid attention because Dream had been making faces at him from across the room. (He did, however, remember getting detention and grilling Dream about it the whole hour).

"That's impossible," George said. "What's going on, Wilbur?"

Wilbur gripped the steering wheel. When he didn't answer, George tried to read his thoughts, but like the rest of his crew, there was something blocking him out. It was almost as if they had all undergone training to block Psychics out... but why would they have a reason to? The thought of Schlatt having something to do with it struck him, but Fundy had said he was a Type I. He figured it must have been a coincidence.

"Nothing. It's unrelated," Wilbur said.

The car slowed down, and George turned to see a crowd of people in fancy gowns exiting their expensive cars and walking down a velvet carpet into an enormous building composed of glass more than any other material.

"We're here," Wilbur said when he pulled into the valet driveway. "Ready?"

The conversation slipped to the back of his mind when his nerves kicked in again, and George took a breath and said, "As I'll ever be."

"Straight ahead then when you get to the next hallway make a left—no wait, right."

"Dude, can you just tell us where to go?" Skeppy shouted at Fundy through his headpiece.

Dream poked his head out to check both sides of the hallway, noting they were both empty, the only sign of life being the music coming through the walls from the ballroom three hallways away. George should've been walking in with Wilbur right about now. If all went according to plan, they would be out of the building without a trace. All Dream had to do was complete his part without messing up. They were all counting on him, after all.

"You try giving people directions while also trying to keep the camera feed on loop so they don't catch you bastards."

Techno and Dream exchanged amused glances.

"Yeah, we're definitely the ones babysittin' him," Techno muttered under his breath quietly enough for just Dream to hear then nodded his head to the right. Dream snickered and followed without a second thought.

The adrenaline rushing his veins made Dream feel like he had just been struck with lightning, and he could hear his racing heartbeat as they hurried through the elegant corridors of the building, all decorated with heavy draping curtains, sculptures, gold plaques, and too many portraits of people he would probably hate to meet. He held his head high and forward and marched with confidence like he was the protagonist of an action movie he was directing himself.

He remembered playing pretend like this. When he was a kid, he would 'practice' his superhero skills to prepare for his future missions. Drista would pretend to be a guard, and Dream would sneak around her in the living room without so much as being spotted. Every time he reached the end to recover whatever valuable they had hidden; she would giggle maniacally and scream "Again! Again!" until they started the game all over. But this was the real deal, and Dream had never felt so ecstatic in his life.

He caught ear of something faint in the distance, and he stilled and said, "Wait."

Standing at a crossroads, they could hear a guard whistling and idling down the hallway. Given by the pace of his footsteps, he was probably about thirty seconds away. In front of them, there was an emergency exit door and beside them, there was a hallway that led to the bathroom, which meant he would probably turn the corner here and run straight into them.

When Techno and he exchanged glances, Dream realized they arrived at the same conclusion. They both searched the hallway for any hiding places, but there were none in reach. Dream looked up and figured they only had one option.

Dream pointed at the vent in the ceiling, and Techno nodded. Behind them, Skeppy had stopped arguing with Fundy and was now staring in between them like he didn't know what was going on.

"There's a guard coming," Dream explained as he took out a rope from his backpack. Meanwhile, Techno propelled himself from a wall to jump up, push the vent open, and get a grip on the ledge.

"Can't I just use the wind?" Skeppy asked and raised his arms.

Before he could summon a tornado inside the hallway and ravage the potted plants and hanging portraits around them, Dream pulled Skeppy's arm down and said, "Too much noise. Use this." He swung the rope up for Techno to grab.

"You guys are no fun," Skeppy muttered and climbed the rope.

Dream turned to see the shadow of the guard growing bigger and bigger against the wall. He climbed into the vent and pulled up the rope with barely a millisecond to spare.

Below them, the guard ambled by with one hand inside his pocket and the other swinging his keys around his index. He was whistling with all the calm in the world.

“Foxy to office team? You guys alive?” Fundy said.

“Perfect,” Techno answered, “though we would have appreciated a heads up about the guard walking toward us.”

Fundy let out an awkward chuckle. “Yeah, uh, I was kinda busy handling something with the ballroom team.”

Dream frowned, thinking of George instantly. “What happened?”

“They’re fine. You guys just focus on the mission. Path is clear, you can go ahead.”

It wasn’t very reassuring, but he figured Fundy would let them know if Wilbur and George needed backup. Dream opened the vent and poked his head out to make sure there was no one nearby before they hopped out.

“We should’ve come up with a name that wasn’t office team,” Skeppy said as they continued down the hallway.

“The Dream team,” Techno suggested but cringed a second later. “No, that doesn’t even work. It’s just your name. Can you change your name? You’re ruining my catchphrases.”

Dream snickered and rolled his eyes. He glanced at the map on the phone Fundy had given them. “Should be right up ahead.”

“Is there like a synonym we can use? Like, oh yeah, the goal team! I can’t wait to achieve all my goals.”

“Make-a-Wish?” Skeppy suggested.

Techno snorted and cracked a smile. “Ah, yeah, the Make-a-Wish team, let’s gooo!”

“What?” Dream asked with a confused laugh. He spotted the plaque beside the door at the end of the hallway that read Mark Bryan. “There.”

“Careful. They probably have some sort of motion sensor built-in,” Fundy said.

“I got it,” Skeppy announced before taking out some baby powder from his bag and sending it flying forward with a gust of wind. Dream didn’t bother asking why he had baby powder in his bag.

The cloud of white dust revealed a dozen laser beams pointed across the hall between the office and them.

“Oh yeah, what a perfect idea. Installing a laser field in front of the office you’re going to literally walk into. It’s almost like we’re the protagonists in a spy novel and this just happens to be a convenient plot device to get us to show off our pro skills.”

“Oh, I’d totally be Ethan Chase. Watch and learn,” Skeppy said with a smirk and rubbed his hands together.

Just as the mission flashed before Dream’s eyes, Techno grabbed his shoulder to stop him before he could throw their plans out the window.

“Why don’t we leave the main protagonist syndrome for another day and avoid setting off all the alarms with a tornado?” He shot Dream a look.

“Go on green boy. Carry the Make-a-Wish team across the finish line.”

“We’re on our way in,” Wilbur said into the microphone pinned to the inside of his suit jacket.

“Copy that,” Phil replied. “Two tables to the right of the stage.”

George swallowed and readjusted his glasses then exited the car. He could hear the chit-chat coming from the enthusiastic crowd of rich and important businesspeople huddled outside the main entrance and walking inside. He just hoped his disguise would be enough to go by unnoticed. Apart from the dyed hair, Niki had caked his face with make-up not to mention the addition of the glasses which were making him feel like Clark Kent. He cringed at the thought, realizing Dream’s superhero phase had certainly had an influence on him.

“Good afternoon, sir.” The valet driver flashed them a smile and then walked around the car to take Wilbur’s spot at the driver’s seat.

Wilbur stepped up next to George and adjusted his sleeves.

“Come on,” he said as he began strolling up the stairs with a charming grin and the spark of confidence George had now come to recognize as the Wilbur spark. “Good afternoon,” he greeted a passerby, and many of them greeted him back with enchanted smiles.

When they reached the front door, George noticed the man scanning the IDs of the people entering, and his heart descended to his stomach.

“I thought you said they weren’t checking entries.”

“They shouldn’t be for guests,” Wilbur whispered through his smile while they walked up the line.

“What happens if they ask for my ID?”

“Foxy?”

“Tell them you forgot your ID and to look for you in the registry. I’ll handle it.”

“The registry? But I don’t work here.” George tried his best to maintain his shaky smile. A lady beside him sent him a little wave and he nodded his head as a greeting.

“Dude, chill. I’ve got it,” Fundy said.

“ID?” The man asked Wilbur and George as they reached the front of the line.

Wilbur slipped his wallet out of his pocket and took out his ID so the man could scan it. “He’s my plus one.”

“We still need to check for IDs, sir.”

Wilbur’s crooked smile widened. “Really? You can’t just take my word for it? The biggest threat he has to offer is stealing the attention of all your lady friends if you catch my drift.” He winked.

The man blinked back with a they-don’t-pay-me-enough-for-this expression. “ID, please, Sir.”

George patted his pockets and pretended to look confused. “Um, looks like I forgot it. Could you look me up in the registry, maybe?”

The man raised an eyebrow but gave an extended sigh and fetched his phone from his pocket. “Name?”

George held his breath and replied, “Miles Eddington.”

Inside, classical music was playing, and people were sauntering around in their expensive gowns and suits making conversation. He could see Phil sitting at the very front conversing with a group of men with greying hair. Phil took a fleeting glance at them and then continued talking.

“Sir, I don’t see your name in the registry.” The man looked back up at him skeptically.

George gave an awkward chuckle. “That’s weird.” The people waiting in line behind them were starting to get annoyed. He fiddled with the microphone inside his suit. “It should certainly be *there*. Could you maybe check again?” He cleared his throat.

He considered using his powers, but frankly, he preferred to keep it as a last resort considering how unpredictable they proved to be and for the fact that he was barely getting used to this new ‘mind control’ ability. Not to mention there were dozens of people around. Sighing, the man continued scrolling his phone.

“Maybe you missed it,” Wilbur said, enunciating his words into his chest. The man glanced up briefly and gave him a weird look.

“Got it,” Fundy said.

Then, frowning, the man squinted and looked closer at his screen. “Hm, I suppose I did.” He clicked something, and then asked, “You’re a part of... the janitorial staff?”

Wilbur snorted and then covered it up with a coughing fit. The man sent him another weird look. “Nearly choked on my own spit there.” He paired it with chuckle that made the situation even more awkward.

The man eyed George again who was staring back with saucer eyes.

“Uh, yes, I am...”

Glancing in between them, the man looked about done with his job and so he gestured toward the ballroom and muttered, “Go.”

They stepped inside without another word, and George finally felt himself breathe properly. His heart was beating a hundred miles an hour, and he desperately tried to ease his anxiety in the middle of the hectic cluster of auras surrounding him.

“Close call. Made it in,” Wilbur said.

“Told you I’d handle it,” Fundy said.

George scoffed. “Barely.”

They settled themselves at one of the tables in the back corners. Skimming the crowd, George spotted Niki serving plates to Phil’s table and Tommy on the other side of the room refilling water glasses. He still wasn’t sure how Tommy was meant to keep his mouth shut considering that, for

the short time George had known him, he knew it wasn't the easiest task to ask of the boy. Yet somehow, he was handling.

"Update?" Wilbur picked up his glass and whispered the question.

"Big Law on the phone here, how may I help you?"

"Where did Foxy go?"

"He's handling something with the office team right now or, uh, apparently they're going by the Make-a-Wish team so now I kind of want to give our team a name which I guess we could use something like guys in the chair or—"

"Big Law. Focus. An update, please?"

"Oh, right. Uh, we've got two guards by the kitchen, one by the stage, and three by the side entrance to the building which should be the ones you keep an eye on because that hallway leads to the exit the Make-a-Wish team is going to take sooo..."

"Copy that."

"Make-a-Wish?" George asked.

Wilbur shrugged. "Don't ask me. Those are your mates there."

"Sounds stupid enough for them to come up with," George agreed and fixed his stare on the men standing by the side entrance as still as the royal guards back in England.

"Are these seats taken?" an older lady in a posh black evening dress asked after she blocking George's view.

"Go right ahead." Wilbur smiled.

The lady, along with a younger woman, took a seat at their table. The older one watched them with curiosity. "I don't believe we've met." She offered George her hand and said, "I'm Mayra, vice-president of the communications department here at Project Salvida."

George shook it and gave her a polite smile despite the internal panic washing over him at hearing her title. "Miles, friend of Wilbur's."

"Oh, you're one of the prospective donors, aren't you?" Mayra asked Wilbur.

"Indeed I am. You sound like you've got an important title there. Pleasure to meet you." Wilbur reached across the table to shake her hand and then the younger woman's.

"Oh, this is my daughter Olivia. Don't mind her. She's not much of a talker. But tell me more about yourselves." Mayra paused to thank Niki for the plate of food she put in front of her. "It doesn't sound like you two are from here."

George made eye contact with Niki as she gave him a plate, and she smiled reassuringly.

"On the contrary, I've lived here since I was a young lad. Miles here is just dropping by to visit, and I thought I might as well invite him to this lovely gala. Been a long-time supporter of Project Salvida."

George winced, but he forced a smile when Mayra eyed him with growing interest.

“Really? Where are you from, Miles?”

“England,” George responded and fixed his gaze on his plate as he dug his knife into his steak. Her aura was calm. At most, he could only pick up on her faint curiosity, but she didn’t seem to suspect anything. It seemed like she was just trying to make conversation, thankfully.

“What brings you here?”

He stabbed his fork into the meat and looked up. “Just visiting some old mates. I figured I needed a change of scenery.”

Mayra chuckled. “Interesting. Seattle isn’t a common place for people to get away to. If anything, it’s quite the opposite.”

It was a playful jab. There was no threatening undertone in her voice nor any bitterness to her aura. Yet George couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable when he heard it.

“Britain is a bit hectic nowadays. It’s not nearly as bad as here.”

Mayra raised an eyebrow. Her aura grew the tiniest bit more tense. “So I’ve heard.” Her interest peaked, and he could barely make out the caution behind her words. “I’m guessing you’re one of those anti-EM supporters.”

George narrowed his eyes, drinking in her aura and dissecting it. What he found surprised him, and before Wilbur could say anything, he replied, “No, actually. We’re pro-EM.”

Wilbur nearly choked on his steak.

Mayra pressed back in her chair and looked stunned.

“Are you really?” Olivia’s soft voice perked up beside her.

Wilbur’s stare drilled into the side of his face.

Play along, George said in his head.

Wilbur forced a smile and said, “We are.”

“I suppose we chose the right table then.” Mayra returned the gesture.

“All you gotta do is connect the device I gave you to the code pad. I’ll be able to turn off the lasers for a few seconds at best, so Techno and Skeppy are going to have to run.”

“Got it,” Dream said while securing the control to his chest. He could already feel the energy tingling through his arms and legs, urging him to jump into action. It felt like he had been training all his life for this moment.

Techno patted his shoulder. “I’m countin’ on you. If you set off the alarms, just know Skeppy and I will be out in the time it takes the guards to find you.”

Dream laughed. “Thanks. That’s so reassuring.”

“No problem. Now go.”

Dream turned to face the red lasers that were pointed at different angles from the floor and up into the ceiling. There was no nearby furniture he could climb, and the dangling lights looked too weak to hang from. He would have to go through it the hard way which wouldn't be a problem. Of course, it wouldn't. Dream had gotten through enough of the most difficult play-laser obstacle courses at AGE. Sure, it wasn't his best skill and a win rate of 60% wasn't exactly ideal and yeah, this was much more high-stake, but he didn't exactly have the option to fail. This was what he was good at. He was Dream for God's sake. The guy everyone aspired to be and who was constantly praised for being so agile. He wasn't going to fail now.

So why did it feel like his stomach was about to burst? He couldn't afford to be nervous right now. Everyone was counting on him. For the first time, he wasn't doing this solely for the praise and his pride. He was doing it for the Bergman Defenders, for Queen Anne's, for the students at AGE, for Bad, for Sapnap, for George. And for himself.

Dream swallowed. For once in his life, he couldn't afford to mess this up.

Skeppy exaggerated a yawn behind him. "Any day now, dude."

There was a slapping noise, and Skeppy muttered out an "Ow, what was that for?"

"He needs to focus."

Focus. Right. Dream had to focus. This wasn't the time for his thoughts to be racing. He just had to go for it. No mistakes. No over-thinking. Only focusing.

It started easy enough. He ducked under the first laser and threw his leg over the next one after that. As he stood perfectly still, his eyes scanned the hall. He spread his arms to keep his balance and then hopped over another.

"An inch above you," Techno called.

"Right beside you!" said Skeppy.

"Don't yell, you'll make him nervous."

"Well, what if he—"

"Guys," Dream said, and they shut their mouths.

Taking another deep breath, Dream made sure to duck under the laser above him and weaved through a few more, having a few close calls that Techno barely managed to call him out on.

He had just made it past the middle when he encountered an obstacle. He was stuck bent in a position that didn't exactly leave him enough room to continue through on his feet. His hands were rooted on the floor between two lasers and his torso was stuck between another two above. The only empty space near was the large gap straight above him, and there were still two lasers in front of him to get through.

"You might have to move back to readjust."

"No. Backtracking is too risky."

"Well? Are you planning to go through the rest upside-down like a monkey in a circus act? Seriously, Dream, just backtrack carefully."

“Trust me, Techno. If I backtrack, I’ll set it off. Just... give me a second.”

He had this.

“I don’t mean to interrupt anything but, uh,” Fundy’s voice came through the earpiece, “there’s a guard coming down the hallway. You have a minute and a half at best.”

Well, shit.

“Dream, come back,” Techno said.

Dream looked back and considered his options. He could try to backtrack and probably set off the alarms because he was rushing and then get caught by the guard coming. Or he could rush forward and at least try to make it so they could enter the office before the guard got there. In a split second, he looked toward the ceiling and made his decision.

“It’ll take too long.”

He held his breath. He raised his feet off the ground up from a downward dog position and used all his core strength to very carefully pull his feet through the gap of lasers. He ended up in a handstand position staring back at Techno and Skeppy who looked like they had seen a ghost.

“You’re an absolute madlad,” Skeppy said. Techno huffed and crossed his arms, seemingly unimpressed by his carelessness. But what was life without a couple of risks?

Dream flashed them a grin. “Thanks.”

He slowly shimmied his body to face the door and then lowered his legs on the other side of the second laser. Back on his two feet, he bypassed the last laser as easy as walking under a limbo stick.

He was breathing hard and heavy, and his heartbeat was resonating throughout his whole body from the adrenaline rush. He turned back with a huge smile and threw his arms in the air. “Let’s go!”

“Yeah, yeah, great. Now could you please turn off the lasers before we get caught?” said Techno.

“Oh, right.” Dream turned to the code pad, unlatched the device from his chest, and then connected it with a short cable he had stored in his pocket. “Now, Fundy.”

“Okay. You got three seconds max to run through. Ready?”

“Do it,” Skeppy called out.

The field of lasers flickered a few times before turning off. Techno and Skeppy dashed through the hall and barely managed to get to the other side before the lasers turned back on.

Skeppy put his hands on his knees and tried to catch his breath. “That was too close.”

“Tell me about it. You almost lost that dump truck of yours,” Fundy responded. Techno snickered while Dream burst into wheezes. Skeppy rolled his eyes.

“Office’s open. Hurry,” Fundy said.

They shut the door just as the guard came around the corner and then took a second to breathe inside the dark office. Dream’s eyes took a moment to adjust before his night vision kicked in. The

adrenaline was still pumping through his veins, and he felt like throwing his hands in the air and screaming out in celebration, but he figured now wasn't the time to go wild about it. Maybe later.

"Don't turn on the lights. It'll trigger an alarm on Bryan's watch."

"Got it. Just wander around aimlessly in the dark," Skeppy said.

"Imagine being a loser and not having night vision." Techno smirked while heading toward the computer. He connected the flash drive to the CPU and said, "Alright, Fundy. PC's all yours."

"Ohohohoho, Papa's gonna take good care of you," Fundy muttered to himself, and Dream heard him crack his knuckles before he began to type. He could practically hear the twisted grin on his expression.

Dream glanced around the office. It wasn't much different than what he expected. There were a few bookshelves with a range of books about law and small clay sculptures, and the seats were made of expensive maroon leather. The only thing that stood out was the picture frame on the desk. It was a selfie of Bryan with a toothed smile and his cheek pressed against a little girl's cheek who was smiling even wider, so wide the corners of her eyes were crinkled.

"Bryan has a daughter?" Dream said.

"Heh? Who would've thought," Techno replied.

"That pig? Must suck to be a part of his family," Skeppy said.

"What do you have against pigs?" said Techno.

Dream tuned out their argument as he peered at the picture. It was an odd sight to imagine Bryan as a father when Dream had only ever seen him as a monster who loved portraying EMs like the scum of Earth. He had always felt a fit of rage bubbling in his stomach at so much as the sound of his voice.

But he had never really considered the fact that he was a person with a family. That, in some fucked up way, even Bryan might've been doing something he thought was right. It only sickened Dream more to gaze at this innocent little girl next to this man. Dream hoped he at least treated his own daughter right; unlike the way he treated every other innocent EM child in the country.

Dream could only hope this girl wouldn't end up corrupted. It wasn't her fault. But growing up around such bigotry and hatred, she would probably end up continuing the cycle—either deadly afraid of EMs or condemning them to hell. Just the thought of it worsened the knot at the back of his throat.

"Dream?" Skeppy said.

When he looked up, he realized Techno and Skeppy were already at the door looking back at him.

Techno asked, "You alright?"

"Yeah." Dream shook himself out of it and followed them out of the office.

Fundy said, "Okay. Now. Whatever you— disconnect— tablet from the— signal."

The three of them exchanged glances before Techno said, "Uh, Fundy, buddy, you're breakin' up there."

“Do— disconnect the tablet— pad— it?”

Skeppy shrugged. “If you say so.”

“No wait, Skeppy!” Dream called out just as he unplugged the tablet.

For a second, everything remained still. Until the screen started flashing red and the message ‘system corrupted’ appeared and then the lasers behind them turned off. Dream was left to stare in horror.

Techno said, “Great, so this is the part where we get fucked.”

Wilbur frowned. “You’re pro-EM? And you work here?”

“I’m surprised to hear you say that. I thought you said you were a supporter.” Mayra took a sip of her water. “Regardless. I don’t resent EMs like some of the people here. I support basic human rights for everyone.”

“But Project Salvida wants to limit the rights of EMs,” George said.

“The media certainly makes it sound like we want them imprisoned or something. They make us look like monsters. Especially Bryan.” Mayra chuckled and shook her head. She took a bite of her food. “All the organization seeks is more regulations for them. No powers in public, penalties for the destruction of public property in the streets, things like that. Have you been to Queen Anne? The place is practically crawling with vines and plants breaking through concrete and roads and broken hydrants and cracks left by unnatural earthquakes. It’s an absolute mess. It’s why we’re trying to pull off this project in the first place.”

“Right,” Wilbur said, the strain in his voice making it obvious that he was holding his words back.

George picked up on the trace of confusion peaking in Mayra’s aura, but before she could question Wilbur, he intervened. “You mentioned the media putting Bryan in a bad light. Are you saying he doesn’t believe what he says?”

“Well. It’s not that he doesn’t believe his words, Mark is just... a bit of a complicated man, I admit.” Mayra set her fork down and tapped her lips with her napkin before sighing. “I don’t agree with some of the things he does, but I do admit, I feel bad for him.”

“Why?”

“He has a beautiful daughter. Used to be the life of every event he held at his house back when the company was much smaller and closer.” The sadness in her aura caused George’s throat to tighten. “She got sick some time ago. Poor girl. She seems to grow weaker by the day too. I’ve gone to visit her a few times. She still smiles and she talks the same. Such a sweet girl.” Mayra gave a sad smile. “Doesn’t deserve this.”

“What’s wrong with her?” Wilbur said.

“The doctors aren’t sure, just that her body isn’t reacting to treatment. They’re not sure she’s going to make it.”

“Did she get sick all the sudden? No explanation?” Catching the growing intrigue from Wilbur, George glanced at him in confusion.

“Yes, actually. It came about from one day to the next. They thought it was a cold at first, but when she started throwing up, her family took her to the hospital and they kept her in for surveillance. That was a few months ago.”

“How old did you say she was?”

Mayra frowned. “Eight years old. Why?”

Wilbur hesitated before responding, “Nothing. It just sounded familiar.”

“You know something,” Olivia said, her stare fixed on Wilbur. “Don’t you?”

Noticing how far her demeanor had shifted, George tried to read her thoughts, but just as he peeked inside her mind, a wave of nausea hit him square in the face and he had to resist the urge to throw up. He gripped the table and winced, trying to reel his mind back. At the same time, Olivia’s chair scraped the marble floor.

“Honey, are you okay? You’ve gone pale,” Mayra said.

George restrained himself from projecting his emotions, and the muscles in his hands grew weaker from how tight he was clinging to the table.

“I feel sick,” Olivia said. “I think I— I need to go to the restroom.”

Her heels clinked as she rushed away, and the further she got, the more at ease George felt, and he could think clearly again. It certainly hadn’t felt like an empathetic feedback loop. If anything, it felt like those exhausted moments he had after pushing his abilities a little too far. But his only concern was that it had come out of nowhere.

“George?” Wilbur asked.

George finally looked up and realized the table was empty.

“Alright?”

George didn’t have time to answer. On the stage, Mark Bryan stepped up to the microphone and tapped it a few times before saying, “This thing working? Oh, I suppose it is.” He grinned. “Welcome ladies, gentlemen, and folks of all genders to our special gala for today. First, I’d like to thank my favorite right-hand man, Schlatt, over here,” he said, gesturing toward Schlatt who was standing beside the stage dressed in a more elegant suit than usual, “for helping me make this event possible. A round of applause for him, please.”

Everyone stood up and clapped. George forced himself out of his daze and followed the crowd’s actions. Wilbur kept stealing concerned glances, and George whispered, “Alright,” as they sat back down.

“As you know, today we’re here to gather funds for our special project to renovate one of the most populated and underserved neighborhoods in—”

Tubbo’s panicked voice came through his earpiece. “Uh, guys, we kinda have a problem.”

“What is it?”

Just as he did, George noticed the guards at the side of the stage rush toward the side entrance while speaking into their radios. Bryan was still going on about the project without noticing the

commotion.

Wilbur said, “We need to—”

“Fire!” someone cut off Bryan mid-speech.

Then all hell broke loose.

George turned in time to hear their shrieks. Chairs were knocked over and glasses were shattered as people rushed away from the cloud of smoke coming from one of the tables.

It gained the attention of the guards who headed toward the exit. One of them pointed toward Tommy who was caught backing away in a very incriminating position. When Tommy and the guard made eye contact, the guard pointed and shouted, “Stop right there.”

Tommy turned on his heel and dashed toward the kitchen.

“Oh, Tommy, what the fuck did you do,” Wilbur said and searched around in a panic. “That wasn’t part of the plan.”

“If he gets caught, he’ll get taken in by the cops,” said George.

His heart was beating hard and fast as his eyes darted back and forth through the panicked crowd and guards running. Rushing desperation whirled around him and made him feel dizzy. George repeated the words “calm down” to keep his focus honed on anything beside the chaos inhabiting the air.

Wilbur clenched his fists at his sides and jumped to his feet. “Not if I can help it.” The light from the chandeliers above began to wrap around his hands. Two orbs of light grew around them, and as he raised his fists in the air, the orbs floated toward the ceiling and collided into one big sun that shined so bright it blinded George and the rest of the crowd.

“He’s an EM,” someone shouted.

The screaming from the people rushing toward the exits made his heart thump faster. His mind was at the edge of bursting into a million pieces. He tried to breathe, but the thoughts striking him from every side were too loud and he couldn’t turn his brain off.

He turned to see the guards running at them with their pistols out. His eyes flashed wide and on instinct, he raised his arms and their weapons flew out of their hands.

The guards froze on their spots with aghast expressions as George held them in place. George felt high on panic, and dread pierced through him when he heard one of them shout, “All teams report! We’ve got a Psychic in the ballroom!”

“Fundy. This would be a great time for you to give us the nearest exit,” Techno said as they rushed through the hall.

“Uhm, I, Tubbo, give— directions— in the middle of something here—” said Fundy.

“Uhhhh, I don’t know where they are!?” Tubbo replied.

“Follow the red dots— screen for— sake!”

“Right, right, um, turn left on the— hallway and straight ahead!”

“What’s more important than getting us out of here right now?” Dream demanded.

“Ballroom’s— guards— nuts!”

“Why is this stupid thing breaking up?” Skeppy slapped his earpiece. They turned the corner to see two guards running toward them who stilled the moment they saw them. “TUBBO!”

“Uh, uh, go— Go straight!”

“Straight where?” screamed Dream.

“The hallway you were running through! There’s— exit straight ahead past— ballroom— !”

As the guards reached for their weapons, Skeppy sent them flying against the walls with a gust of wind, and they continued down the hall at full speed.

“What’s going on in the ballroom?” Techno asked.

“The alarm— used his— George—”

Dream’s heart sunk to his stomach, and he halted at the crossroads. “What happened to George?”

“I don’t— powers and— cops!”

“Dream, come on!” Techno called out as he reached the exit. Skeppy seemed to already be out the door.

Behind Dream, the guards shouted, “Stop right there and put your hands up.”

Dream turned to look at the two guards that had their guns pointed at him and then at Techno who was staring back at him with the exit door half-open. Then he looked at the ballroom door, and he knew what he had to do.

George’s head was on the verge of exploding. People were screaming. Tables were flying. Smoke was filling the room. The fire alarm was blaring, and the sprinkles had just activated. Wilbur was still beside him, the sun above them gone, now facing off with the guards surrounding them.

“George, snap out of it and get us out of here.”

“Stand down!” one of the guards said.

As the havoc diverged into a piercing pitch inside his head, George pressed his hands over his ears and his knees buckled under him. Someone was screaming. He couldn’t tell if it was him. Everyone was so loud. Everything was too loud. He couldn’t contain hold it in. A hand touched his back, and Wilbur said, “Breathe.”

Breathe.

The front doors burst open. “Hands down everybody!”

And George lost it.

The vortex of energy in his mind broke loose. A cacophony shattered the air like a freight train barreling toward him. Shrieks and cries from all. The muffled voices of cops shouting. Wilbur screaming something. Guns drawn and bullets shot.

Everything else slowed.

“George,” Dream’s voice was the only sound that overpowered the havoc.

And when George opened his eyes, he saw him at the entrance and Techno behind him. Dream was scanning the room in a frenzy. When George followed his line of sight, he realized there were bullets frozen in the air around Wilbur and him, and as his eyes passed the stage, he saw Bryan lying on the floor of the stage with Schlatt holding him.

Blood. So much blood.

His stomach twisted.

His vision swirled.

He only got one last look at Dream’s horrified expression before he felt the tranq stab the back of his neck.

“I killed him. I killed a man.”

“You don’t know that George. He might just be... hurt.” Dream’s words were cautious, and George felt no better hearing them.

As they sat in the corner of the cell at the police station, Dream rubbed soothing circles onto the small of his back. George clung to his torso and buried his face into his shirt, finding comfort in his scent and the thumping in his chest.

Even with the muters on, George could hardly keep his head from spiraling. His heart hadn’t stopped sprinting since he awoke, and every little movement made him flinch. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to drown out the muffled sounds of the police station through the thin walls.

Wilbur and Techno were quiet. They had only really whispered amongst themselves and sometimes to Dream. George figured they were trying not to overwhelm him. Or maybe they hated him. He wasn’t sure, but both conclusions made sense.

All George knew was that it was over.

George was done for, and the worst part was that he had dragged all of them with him. They didn’t deserve to be locked up. It wasn’t their fault. George was the one who threw the plan off the rails. George was the one to drive the cops to start shooting. George was the one who had deflected the bullet that had hit Bryan.

George had killed a man.

A man with a family. A man with a sick daughter. A man who, although he might’ve been outwardly awful to his people, ultimately didn’t deserve to die that way.

George had killed him, and there was no turning back. He deserved to be locked up in a facility. He deserved to never see the light of day. They had been right about him—he was a danger to society.

George didn't deserve to be free.

Dream pressed his nose into George's ruffled hair and tightened his grip around him. "It's not your fault," he whispered.

George choked up. The back of his eyes burned. A tear slipped through his eyelashes and down his cheek to his lip, and the taste of salt stung the inside of his cheeks.

It is, he responded in his head as if Dream could hear his thoughts, but his muters cut off any physic connection between them.

"What are we going to do?" Dream said.

"Don't worry." Wilbur, who was leaning on the bars staring at the door, reassured him.

Dream's voice turned sharp. "Don't worry? We're fugitives locked in a fucking cell about to be questioned because we crashed into a gala with a lot of important people."

It went without saying, but they all knew their most grave mistake had been putting Mark Bryan in the hospital. And it had all been George's fault.

"They'll get us out," said Techno who was sitting with his legs crisscrossed on the opposite side of the cell without a hint of worry in his expression.

"How do you know?"

As if on cue, the door burst open, and an officer strolled inside with Schlatt next to him. They stopped in front of their barred cell and eyed them. George clutched his necklace and watched them through narrowed eyes, enduring the ache in his throat.

"Do you know them?" the officer said.

Schlatt kept quiet as he scanned them and then said, "Never seen them in my life. I only saw these two at the gala. I have no idea how they got in." Had George not known he who he was, he would've entirely been convinced solely by his tone. "What were you intending?"

Nobody answered, and after a moment, the officer sighed. "They haven't spoken a word since we brought them in."

"We'll get it out of them eventually," Schlatt said. "For now, just keep an eye on them and make sure they don't escape."

"Of course. Nobody's ever broken out of this place. We'll handle them while we get the green light to transfer them to Blackwood Penitentiary."

George's breath hitched at the name, and Dream gave his arm a gentle squeeze.

"Perfect." Schlatt watched them for a few more seconds before turning on his heel and leaving.

"What was that for?" Dream said after the door closed behind him.

Techno got on his feet and knelt to pick up something from the ground. When he raised it up to examine it, George squinted and realized it was a tiny metal nub.

"This." Techno glanced at Wilbur, and Wilbur nodded.

George frowned. “What is—”

Techno pressed on the nub, and it extended into what appeared to be a metal pen.

“The hell is that?” said Dream.

“One of Fundy’s little toys,” Wilbur replied while Techno pressed the end of the pen to the wall and a laser began drilling through the gaps on the brick, slicing through like a knife going through butter.

“Won’t they see us through the cameras?” George asked in a panic and pointed toward the blinking camera in the corner while Dream dragged him to his feet.

“Schlatt’s probably taken care of that already.” Wilbur said.

After Techno had traced a square into the bricks, he gave it a gentle tap and the wall crumbled into a cloud of grey dust. The parking lot came into view after it cleared, and Techno looked back and smirked. “Ready?”

As Techno and Wilbur stepped out and Dream began to walk with his hand around George’s wrist, George remained rooted to his spot. “George?”

“I can’t,” George said and pulled his wrist to his chest. He clutched the crystal around his neck while peering into Dream’s wide and vulnerable eyes. His throat and chest ached from the piercing sensation he was swallowing back. “You saw what I did back there, Dream.”

Frowning, Dream took a step forward, and George took a step back in the same second and raised his palm to keep them at arm’s length. “Someone needs to take the blame for it, and it has to be me.” George took a breath, and the stench of rubble and concrete filled his nose. “Face it. I’m dangerous, Dream. This is the best option for... for everyone.”

Dream’s voice cracked and his eyes glossed over, but he released a humorless chuckle and said, “Stop being an idiot and come out before the cops see us.”

“I’m not joking.”

“Me neither.”

Dream’s puzzled expression shifted into a scowl. As the stared each other down, the memory of the silent looks they shared in between stifled giggles and dumb jokes under the comfort of their tree back at AGE weighed on George’s chest, and he found himself wondering what his life would’ve been had Dream not dropped down and startled him on that fated day when he discovered what it was like to have a friend. He wondered if Dream would’ve been better off without George holding him back.

Wilbur cleared his throat. “I hate to break up whatever’s going on here but our ride’s here and it’s leaving in less than a minute so...”

Dream hummed. He leaped forward and took hold of George’s wrist, pulling him toward the hole. “Let go of me,” George said while leaning all his weight back to stay inside the cell.

“I’m not going to let you throw your life away.”

“I’m protecting every—”

“No, you’re not George,” Dream shouted, and the sharpness in his tone made George halt. Dream stopped tugging, but he clung to George’s wrist, and tears gathered at the corners of his eyes, and it was then that George realized he was shaking.

“You’re only thinking about yourself again. What about Bad? What about Sapnap? What about *me*, George?”

George blinked and stared at him with his lips parted. “I—”

The door burst open. An officer rushed in with his gun drawn. Dream yanked him out of the cell just as the gun went off and the explosion made George’s ears pop.

Then Dream was pulling him into a van. Gunshots were echoing behind them. Wheels were screeching against the asphalt. Fundy was shouting something from the front seat. His heart was hammering against ribcage and making his chest hurt.

“George.”

Dream’s face came into focus in front of him. His hands were gripping his shoulders, and he was shaking him.

“Huh?”

“Are you okay?” Dream asked.

Fundy was in the driver’s seat staring ahead as they drove down a lone road. Tubbo was in the passenger seat looking back at Wilbur and explaining something about Tommy. Techno was in the process of taking off his muters and handing off the scanner to Dream.

“Yeah, I think,” George said while Dream turned his wrists with a gentle move and took his cuffs off before he took off his own. Then he tossed the scanner aside and took a second to massage the red streaks around George’s wrists, and the emotion that had been suffocating George just a second earlier dissipated.

The rest of the ride was fuzzy.

When they arrived at Sleepy HQ, Tommy was the first to rush to the door and envelop Wilbur into a hug while uttering out a dozen *thank you’s* and simultaneously calling him names like *big bastard* and *dumb idiot*. Meanwhile, Niki went around with a health kit making sure everyone was taken care of. Skeppy joined Dream and George on the couch where Dream was helping George through breathing exercises while he tried to wind down.

After checking in on Fundy and Tubbo who were now off no doubt exaggerating their breakout, Phil joined them in the living room. He looked like he was trying to keep it together as he explained how Bryan was still in grave condition but that he was alive (for now). He didn’t at all mention how big of a shit they would all be stuck in if he did die (or more precisely, how big of a shit George would be in). He also didn’t bother turning to George at all, and his aura told George that he was trying hard to hold his frustration in.

George didn’t blame him. He had ruined the whole plan, and he had broken the most important rule Phil had laid out. If he were Phil, George wouldn’t have even been allowed back into the building.

“Well, a deal’s a deal,” Wilbur told the three of them.

“But we failed,” Skeppy said.

“We got the flash drive. Sure, everything else kind of went a bit off track, but we got what we needed, at least. The convention’s been delayed so it gives us enough time to get this out to the media.” Wilbur offered a small smile when he noticed the shame that washed over George’s expression. “Let’s take you to your friend.”

George took refuge by the corner of the room while the others said their goodbyes. Tommy and Tubbo approached him after they said their goodbyes to Skeppy.

“You know, Gogy, you’re pretty cool,” Tommy said.

George forced out a chuckle despite the way his throat still ached and he felt like he could throw up right about now. “Thanks.”

“Yeah!” Tubbo said. “I really hope we see each other again someday. Maybe we’ll even go on another mission together.”

George nibbled on the inside of his cheek and smiled. “Maybe.”

Niki approached him after they left. “Take it easy on yourself, George. It wasn’t your fault,” she said.

George didn’t believe her, but he nodded anyway because he didn’t feel like continuing the conversation. Niki’s smile was warm as she pulled him into a hug. Then she gave him a pat on the back and went to Skeppy.

George walked over to stand by the door just so he wouldn’t have to say goodbye to anyone else. He couldn’t take the way they were all clearly holding back their true thoughts. When he felt someone’s eyes on him, he scanned the room and noticed Schlatt on the other side scrutinizing him with a poker face. There was something George felt like he knew, but his instincts drove him to stay as far away as he could. Just having Schlatt’s attention made George’s body feel stuck in this perpetual fight or flight mode.

There was a little presence in his mind that felt unfamiliar—one that told him it wasn’t the time as if it could somehow tell the future.

When all their goodbyes were said and done and they were about to head out, George didn’t miss the way Phil pulled Dream aside for a moment. He only caught on to the last part of his sentence. “— spot on the team for you, if you want it.”

But what filled him with the most dread was Dream’s reply.

“I’ll think about it.”

The ride was silent. Everybody was on edge. Although Wilbur was the calmest, he had picked up on the tension in the vehicle and hadn’t said anything for a while. Dream and George had barely spoken a word to each other about what happened. The whole experience felt surreal for George, and he was starting to wonder if it had happened.

Yet Dream’s words echoed in his head. He had thought he was sacrificing himself for them, but the more he pondered it, the more he realized it was for himself. Because he felt guilty. Because he believed he deserved it. Because he believed it was the better option for everyone. But really, all he

was doing was hurting his friends and complicating things even more. Sure, their plan was already in shambles, but there was no reason for George to add fuel to the fire.

Eventually, George felt the van stop. “We’re here,” Wilbur said while turning off the engine.

“This... it can’t be,” Skeppy said.

Looking up with a frown, George realized what he was so shocked about.

In front of them, there stood a barbed wire fence with a huge sign that read *Restricted Area*. Behind it, there was a large decrepit building with broken windows, crippled concrete walls, rusted metal, and a jungle infesting every nook and crevice. Atop, there was a barely legible sign that read, *Andromeda Labs Research Facility*.

Dream stared at it with his mouth agape. “It’s—”

“... gone.”

Those idiots.

He gripped the sheets with tight knuckles. His eyes ached from the searing tears he was suppressing. His chest felt like it was about to implode from the anger igniting inside him.

The news woman’s voice faded into the background. All he registered was the footage they were showing of the accident at the ballroom of the Project Salvida HQ.

Those fucking idiots.

His friend’s faces flashed across the screen with a large disclaimer about how dangerous they were. At that moment, he wished could stand in front of them—shouting every profanity and asking them why. Here he was stuck in a hospital handcuffed to a white bed, his parents arguing about what to do with him in the next room, while they were out there making a mess with the Bergman Defenders of all people after they had explicitly said they would steer clear of attention.

And yet, behind all his rage, he could feel the ache of despair mixed within him. The one that made his lip quiver and let all his insecurities come through.

They had left. With Sapnap unconscious and not knowing whether he would even wake up, they had left him. Even after Sapnap had admitted everything to George. Even though Dream had known all those years—after he confessed it that day he found him moping about the garden on that winter evening.

And for the first time in years, the dread he had tried to avoid washed over him like a tsunami splurging through every part of his body and filling him with despair.

His friends had abandoned him.

Chapter End Notes

If you follow me on Twitter, you probably know I was out for so long, but tldr; I was

having a very hard time with my meds, but we're back now! And the best news is: I'M DONE WITH THE STORY! So instead of having you all wait for updates, I'll just update on each chapter that's left per day/every other day depending on how my revision goes.

As someone who only really finishes their fics 50% of the time and hasn't written a longfic over 60k before, finishing this project has, I'm not joking, been one of the biggest accomplishments of my life. It wouldn't have been possible without y'all so thank you so much for all the support! You've made one of my biggest dreams come true, I love y'all so much!

I'm going to be doing a discussion/q&a stream on [my Twitch](#) in the coming week for the story so it'd be great if those who are interested could fill out these forms; [this one for the date you'd prefer it to be](#) and [this one for questions, comments, and topics you'd like me to address](#). It'll be just a small little chill stream for anybody who wants to hear me talk about the story and/or the writing process :))

See you tomorrow or Sunday for the next chapter!

[tumblr](#) & [twitter](#)

Notes

- Niki has some sound advice there... really hope George takes it there aha
- "Complicated" is one way to say it
- This chapter is basically a spy novel lmao
- MAKE A WISH!
- Miles Eddington, head of the janitorial staff, what an icon
- "It's almost like we're the protagonists of a spy novel and this just so happens to be the convenient plot point to show off our pro skills." - Meta comments during the story through dialogue is one of my favorite past times, okay?
- Cue the plan falling apart half-way through as you do, you know
- Okay but Wilbur setting off a distraction so Tommy doesn't get caught, big brother move ; - ;
- George thinking he's being selfless for sacrificing himself but really he's being selfish because he wants to punish himself but that's only bring more trouble for them and Dream calling him out because he cares why am I crying over my own story D:
- SAPNAP

Psyche

Chapter Notes

This chapter was beta-ed by Grav and Grass so thank youuuu!!! <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" Skeppy asked.

"This is the only government-owned research lab in Seattle. If there's any else, then they'd be completely under wrap. I got Fundy to cross-reference all research facilities he could find. There's no other place but here. If you go in, you might be able to find something to point you in the right direction," Wilbur said.

It couldn't be. There had to be a mistake. They had traveled across nine states to find their friend only to come to face a broken-down facility at the end of their journey. Dream opened the van door and stepped out, staring at the fence in disbelief. George trailed behind, silent.

"This is as far as I go," Wilbur said from the front seat. "But if you need us, you know where to find us."

"Thanks for everything," George said.

"Yeah, for everything..." Dream added.

"You guys be careful. Fundy's going to keep the police off your arse for as long as he can. If you need refuge after, just come to us. I'm sure Phil wouldn't mind, and we've got plenty of connections in different places. We can make you disappear."

They were still quiet. George hadn't stopped staring at the towering fence in front of him. It looked like the entrance to a prison courtyard. It was terribly ironic, really, the fact he had spent over half of his life terrified of places like this and now he was willfully walking into one.

"We'll keep it in mind," Dream said. With a hard pull, the chains holding the two gates together came apart, and they were in.

Entering the building was easy. There were craters and broken windows on every side of the wasted structure. As soon as they walked in, George was bombarded with the hefty energy scarred into the walls of the facility. It made him short of breath and disoriented, and he had to stop to gauge his surroundings.

It was like the building itself was struggling to wake from a never-ending nightmare with all the torturous memories living in its shadow. He didn't know nor did he want to find out the kind of operations it had run during its day. Yet despite the overwhelming need to run away from the place, he also felt a strange connection to it.

"Are you okay, George?"

George realized he had been frozen in the middle of the hallway staring into nothingness. He raised his chin to meet Dream's eyes with uncertainty.

“You can wait for us outside if you want.”

His fingers gripped the crystal on his neck, and he shook his head. “No. It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“I think I found something,” Skeppy’s voice echoed from down the hallway.

After glancing at each other momentarily, they followed his voice to a room at the end of the hallway. As soon as George stepped inside, his knees nearly buckled under his weight. A memory—not his own—flashed in his vision.

An office. Incessant tapping of a pen against a clipboard. Lavender air freshener. The blurry image of a person sitting in front of him. Pale thumbs on his lap rolling over each other in circles. A grandfather clock counting down each second. The hour hand pointed toward the tip of a bird’s wing.

“The voice. It doesn’t stop. I think something’s wrong with me.”

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick—

“George.”

He blinked, and he was standing in front of a grandfather clock. It was frozen in time. The once fine chocolate wood was dusted all over and chipped with scratches. The golden pendulum and weights were now stained with a murky hue. The white face of the clock had turned yellow with dirty spots smeared on the cracked glass. The only untouched beautiful remnant was that of the swirling bird on its face. George couldn’t take his eyes off it. Another memory edged in his mind, but his instincts blocked it out, almost like it was too painful to remember. He clutched his necklace tighter, trying to swallow the heaviness weighing in his throat.

“Come look at this.”

George forced his eyes away from the clock, and he approached Dream and Skeppy who were behind the desk reading through some old files. The top of the manilla folder read Project Delta.

“Isn’t that the name of...”

“That’s not it.” Dream waved George over. He pointed at the page with a brief abstract of the project. The words were hardly readable, and some parts of the paper were ripped, but George managed to catch the date and a bit of the summary. He wished he hadn’t.

“This is the facility where they kept the originals.”

Dream nodded and scrambled through the papers in the cardboard box. “Only readable thing left. Everything else is shredded.”

“We have to—” Dream stopped. His head perked up. His eyes turned wide.

George frowned. “What is—”

“Shhh.” He raised his finger to shush him.

Dream put the file down. He rushed toward one of the bookshelves, and the wood screeched against the floor as he pushed it off the wall to reveal an air vent at the very bottom. He gripped the handles and then struggled to pull on it until it unlatched from the wall. He put his ear near and listened.

Silence.

“I hear something.”

“What?”

“Air circulation. It’s faint, but it’s there. The vent looks like it’s leading underground. There must be a way in.” Dream jumped to his feet and hurried out of the room. Skeppy followed without hesitation, leaving George alone.

For a second, he remained taking in the eerie silence of the room. In the back of his mind, something pushed. It made him want to puke. There was so much hurt in the air—remains of those EMs who paved the way for them. He was drowning in the shreds of their auras left ingrained in the furniture and scratched-down walls. And somewhere in it, he felt a comforting familiarity, a sense of understanding. Like the room itself was telling George he wasn’t alone. Like it knew something he didn’t.

“George?” Dream called from down the hallway, and only then did George manage to get his feet moving out of the door, though not before glancing at the room one more time.

“If this place has vents, there has to be a maintenance entrance,” Dream said as they searched the back of the building.

After a few minutes of silence, Skeppy slammed his palms hard against the metal door. George turned to see him with both hands leaning on it and his head lowered. His voice was hoarse and desperate. “It’s fucking useless. What if this isn’t even the right place? We can’t keep doing this forever. They’re going to catch us.”

He pressed his forehead against the door and closed his eyes. George tried to move forward to put a hand on his shoulder, but he ended up taking a step back instead due to his intense aura. He could hardly breathe in the thick fog of shame. They had failed. After all they struggled with, they were lost at a dead end, and Bad was still out there.

Dream nodded at George and then headed toward Skeppy to talk to him.

George would’ve stayed to listen had it not been for the blinking sunlight peeking through the forest trees beside the facility that caught his attention. His feet drew him closer, and he watched it through narrowed eyes. Although it looked normal, there was something magnetizing about it. And as he dove deeper into his strange sense of awe, he caught a flash of long hair in between the trees.

His heart leaped to his throat, and all the sudden leaves were crunching underneath his shoes. He couldn’t see what he was chasing, but his feet were moving on their own accord as if he had been here before. He closed his eyes and breathed in. The chilly breeze around his nostrils. The twigs breaking underneath him. The birds singing in the distance. It was like running through a memory.

“George!”

He opened his eyes and he realized he had stopped. His friends approached him from behind. Dream placed a hand on his shoulder and turned him to see his perplexed expression. “What the hell?”

“I... I thought I saw someone.”

Dream stared at him for a second before he let go and got on one knee. His nostrils flared a few times, and he felt the dirt with his fingers. He looked up at George again through furrowed

eyebrows. “No one’s been here.” He got up and stepped closer. “Are you okay?”

“I saw someone, Dream,” George insisted. The image remained fresh in his mind.

“Guys.” Skeppy caught both their attention. George turned to see him kneeling over a rusty metal bar buried in the soil.

Dream dropped next to him and ran his fingers over the rim. Then he took the handle and pulled up. The muscles on his right arm flexed as he did, and the metal squeaked until the lid popped open and revealed a metal ladder leading underground. Dream looked up at both before he started to climb down.

It was too dark for George. He nearly slipped from the dust when his feet reached the ground but managed to stabilize himself with the creaky ladder. Their footsteps echoed long and far like they were in a tunnel.

“It’s a railway,” Dream said. “This must be some kind of maintenance shaft for an underground part of the facility.”

“Do you have anything to light up the place?” George asked.

As he did, Dream pulled his tablet out of his bag and turned on the flashlight so Skeppy and him could see properly. Then he pointed at the railway attached to the room they had just come in through. Something about finding a random underground railway below an abandoned facility where they had experimented on the first of their kind felt sinister. George’s body urged him to turn back, but this was their only lead.

“Let’s follow the rails to the facility. It has to lead somewhere,” Skeppy suggested.

They walked in silence for the most part. Nearly five minutes of nothingness passed until Dream halted. George turned back to see him listening keenly.

“What is it now?”

“There’s a train coming. Get against the walls.”

“This place is old as hell. How would—”

Sure enough, from the direction they had been walking, George spotted two tiny headlights growing brighter and bigger by the millisecond. Heading straight for them. Dream grabbed his wrist and pulled him into his arms and against the wall just as the train rushed past them at an uncanny speed. George felt the force of his hood pulled in the direction of it, and he clung to Dream.

It disappeared just as quickly as it appeared, leaving George’s heart beating at record speed. The side of his face was still buried against Dream’s chest, and when he looked up, he realized Dream was staring at him with that cocky grin that made him blush every time.

“What did I say?”

“Shut up,” George muttered before pushing away from him with a hot face. He followed behind Skeppy who had already started walking again.

Another five minutes and they spotted the light at the end of the tunnel. From a distance, they could see the back of the train compartment. Dream stopped them before they could hurry forward

and pointed at the red blinking light in the back.

“I got it,” Skeppy told them before sending a shred of paper from the trash scattered across the ground flying up with a gust of wind that covered the camera long enough for them to pass through unnoticed.

The train station opened to three elevator doors and an emergency staircase. There was still that uncomfortable feeling nagging George: the one that told him they were walking straight into a mousetrap. He forced himself to ignore it in favor of pushing forward. They took the stairs down which led them into an empty white hallway that resembled a hospital.

They tried the doors, but most of them required keycard access. The only unlocked room was the staff closet. Inside, there was plenty of equipment and lab coats but no key cards.

“Someone’s coming,” Dream said at one point. They hurried into the closet and watched through the crack as the woman in scrubs took off her coat and headed straight for them.

Skeppy muttered a curse right before she opened the door.

The woman gasped, but before she could do anything, George locked eyes with her and pulled her into a hypnotic state. As he did, the woman froze. Her eyes flashed with a milky white. Calmly, she took off her coat, hung it on the coat rack, and then handed them her ID.

“Sylvia?” A voice from behind the door asked. “Heading home to the kids for the day?”

George looked toward Dream in a panic, but Dream sent him a reassuring gaze. Swallowing, George concentrated and then closed his eyes.

Sylvia closed the door on them and turned to face the newcomer.

Yes, of course.

“Yes, of course,” her cheerful voice rang through the hall.

“Alright well, you take care. Taking the overnight shift, unfortunately. Someone needs to handle these kids.” The voice chuckled as they slid their key and another door unlocked.

“Right. Well, good night.” Sylvia turned on her heel and walked off. Carefully, George let go of the grasp of her mind, and he made sure to leave no recollection of what had just occurred.

When the elevator door closed, George released his breath and opened the door. Dream handed them a white coat from the stand so they could at least blend in if they ran into someone.

As he handed George the coat, he smiled. “You’re getting better at that.”

George smiled back. “Thanks.”

“Did you hear what he said? Kids? Do you think they were referring to Bad and the others?” Skeppy asked.

Dream and George looked at each other.

“Let’s hope so,” Dream said and nodded toward the door. “Come on.”

They roamed through the hallways of the facility which wasn’t exceptionally difficult seeing as there weren’t many workers around. The only drawback from that was that they would likely be

recognized by any personnel, so they opted toward ducking through smaller lab rooms and break rooms to avoid being spotted in the halls.

“Wait,” Dream replied and pressed his ear against the wall at one point to listen. “They’re talking about the residential sector. They have to be there.”

“How are we supposed to find that? We’re going to get caught before we do,” Skeppy said.

George searched around the lab they were in until he spotted the small office desk at the corner of the room. Figuring there was bound to be a map of the place somewhere, he walked over to it and started searching the drawers.

“Help me search. We should be able to find something. Dream can guard the door,” George said as he rushed to open all the drawers.

The desk belonged to one of the scientists in the facility judging by the files of advanced lab reports organized in the drawers. George couldn’t understand most of it, but some of the files referred to a Project Delta-Z which reassured him that they were in the right place. Unfortunately, the fact that the name resembled the experimentation that took place on the originals was concerning.

“He’s here,” Skeppy said as he walked over to George and showed him the open manilla folder that contained Bad’s file.

A wave of relief washed over him, if only because it meant they had made it. All they had left to do was to get him out of there. The first page contained some basic medical and demographic information. And as they turned to the next, George frowned.

There were handwritten notes from a so-called Dr. Patel.

Patient reports high energy after his second regenerative treatment as well as improved control with his aqua abilities. Patient shows signs of temporary Master abilities and indications of type evolution. Examinations show fixed levels of Delta radiation with minor peaks after treatment. Treatment shows failure to maintain a high enough power level to induce ability evolution.

Looking through the files of the other ten Aquamentals who had been taken showed similar results, each which had George more puzzled than the last.

“They’re trying to turn them into Masters,” George said.

“What?” Dream asked. “That’s impossible. You can’t just make someone’s powers evolve.”

“The real question is why they’re trying to make EMs evolve in the first place.”

“I think I found something worse,” Skeppy interrupted and handed George another folder.

This one was the file of a thirty-five-year-old man he didn’t recognize. The first thing that drew his attention was the address written: a street he recognized belonging to Queen Anne. He had walked past it with Wilbur on his walk to the shelter the day before.

“Look at the next page.”

When George turned the page, he realized what Skeppy had meant by something worse. Why, in fact, it was much, much worse.

Patient reports severe symptoms of Delta Deficiency Sickness after third extraction treatment including nausea, dizzy spells, body weakness, and inability to use his photo abilities. Examinations show low levels of Delta radiation after treatment. Patient must wait the required two-week period before his next visit. Treatment shows overall success in the extraction of Delta radiation without major complications.

George was disgusted. He had never heard of any successful operations in extracting Delta energy from EMs. He remembered when his Bio teacher in tenth grade had mentioned there were theories about it and even a first trial, but the process had been too risky and immoral to go through with it. He remembered how horrified he had felt when she had compared it to harvesting enough blood from a human to let them live and then repeating the process after their body had produced more over and over until they were reduced to a bag of flesh and bones without even the strength to get them on their feet.

“They’re extracting Delta energy from them and... somehow transferring it to Bad and the others.”

“What the hell. To make them Masters? Why the hell would they want to do that?” said Dream.

“I don’t know but we can’t spend all night here. We have to go find Bad,” said Skeppy.

George closed the file and slid it back to its place. His stomach was doing somersaults. He tried to push the sensation away and instead focus on Bad.

“Yeah, let’s go find Bad and then, I don’t know.” He forced his fingers through his hair and pulled on them as he contemplated the situation. They couldn’t just leave, could they? After everything they had found out? But George didn’t doubt the people behind the operation would do everything they could to prevent the information from getting out. And now that they were wanted criminals, it wasn’t likely that anyone would believe them.

“We can’t just stay quiet,” Dream said. His eyes were desperate as he clutched the handle of the door. For once, George decided to push his self-preserving instincts aside.

“You’re right,” George replied. “We can’t. And I know someone who can help us uncover them.”

Taken aback, Dream stared at George momentarily before offering a crooked smile and a nod.

“I got it,” Skeppy exclaimed and slammed down the map he had just found on the table. He pointed at the area that said residential sector with a wide-toothed grin.

Dream’s smile only widened at that. “Okay. Let’s go.”

They hurried out of the lab and made their way through the maze of hallways until they reached a blue door standing out at the end of the hallway with the label residency sector. Just as they were about to move toward it, a nearby door opened, and they were quick to duck into one of the empty storage rooms on the side. George peeked through the window on the door and saw the door close as a brown-haired guy made his way out.

His breath hitched when he realized who it was.

“Bad.”

“Where?” Skeppy pushed him out of the way to look through the window.

“Skeppy, maybe we should—”

Skeppy didn't let Dream finish before he burst the door open and gripped Bad's arm. Bad yelped as he was pulled inside the dark room. The door slammed shut behind him.

"What the muffin is—" Bad's words died when Skeppy buried his face into his shoulder and wrapped his arms around his chest. He looked toward Dream and George with a puzzled glance. Then his arms slowly wrapped around Skeppy's frame when he realized who was hugging him. "Skeppy? Wha— How— What are you guys doing here?"

"It's a really long story," Dream said as he approached, placing a palm on Bad's shoulder seeing as he didn't want to pry Skeppy out of Bad's arms. "But you're safe now."

"Safe?" Bad still looked confused, but he didn't hesitate in strengthening his hold on Skeppy when it became obvious his friend was sniffing against his shoulder.

"I thought we wouldn't be able to find you," Skeppy's muffled voice came through.

Dream stepped back to stand by George and give the two a little space. George clasped his hands together and watched them from a distance with a sad smile.

"Skeppy, I'm okay," Bad reassured him while rubbing circles on his back. He sent Dream and George a concerned look. George responded to it with a soft smile.

The scene caused his throat to knot over. A sense of overwhelming relief had taken to the air, and George couldn't help but breathe it all in and let all his worries fade away with it for a bit. Next to him, Dream scooted close enough that their arms found warmth in each other. George suddenly felt the need to feel his arms around him.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Bad asked.

Skeppy finally pulled back, staring at Bad with glassy eyes and clutching to his arms tight like he didn't yet believe his friend was really in front of him. "They took you."

"Who did?"

At Bad's confused face, Dream said, "We thought they kidnapped you."

"Kidnapped?" Bad's eyes went wide as he looked in between the three of them. "AGE? Why would you think that? On my last physical they said I was susceptible to developing DDS so they asked me if I could stay in here for observation during the summer."

"They're lying to you, Bad. They want to evolve your powers," George said.

"Evolve?" Bad shook his head. "Why would they even want that? It doesn't make any sense. Wouldn't they just ask me?"

"We don't know what their reasons are, but we know they're doing really fucked up things to do it. We need to get you and the others out of here," Dream added.

"Woah, woah, woah, just hold on a second." Bad stepped back and scratched his forehead, contemplating the new information. "This is going by too fast. You're telling me that they lied to us, made us sign disclosure forms, took us from the school all to try to make us Masters?"

"That's exactly what we're saying, and we need to get out of here before they realize we've broken in."

“How did you guys even break in? Or find me? They didn’t even tell us where we were going.”

“Like I said, long story.”

“Can we just get out of here before they find us?” Skeppy said as he grabbed onto Bad’s arm and glanced through the door window to make sure the hallway was clear.

“What are we going to do about the others?” George asked.

“We can come back for them. Right now, our priority is getting out of here and going back to the Bergman Defenders for help. Phil’s not going to object to it, especially knowing they’re using Photos from Queen Anne.”

“Okay, well, guys, I hate to break this to you but I was supposed to be back at my pod ten minutes ago, so it won’t be long before—”

As if on cue, an alarm above the door began to flash in circles and blast at full volume. The door lock engaged. Skeppy tried to scan Sylvia’s card, but it was denied.

“What’s going on?” George shouted over the alarm.

“We have to check in every time we get to our rooms, if we don’t, they look for us. The building goes into lockdown if they can’t find us,” Bad explained.

“What are we supposed to do now?”

“Move aside,” Dream replied as he stepped back. Once they were out of the way, Dream ran full force at the door and struck it with his shoulder several times until it broke off the hinges. “Come on!” he told them as he ran down the hallway they had come from.

“There’s an emergency exit to your right!” Bad called out.

“Stop!” George heard someone shout from behind them. The screeching alarm was making it impossible to think. All George could really do was run. His heart was beating to the same rhythm as their feet on the floor.

“We have company,” he yelled toward Dream at the front.

Skeppy looked over his shoulder and sent a gust of wind flying back, knocking over the person who’d been following them. As George spotted the emergency exit at the end of the hall, his adrenaline kicked in. They were so close to freedom. So close to completing their mission. Then suddenly, he felt a needle prick his neck, and he reached his hand only to realize it was a tranq.

His feet came to a halt abruptly as his whole body weighed him down. He fell to his knees. Behind him, he turned to see a dark-haired woman with a tranquilizer gun trotting forward.

“George,” Bad called out when he realized what had just happened.

When George looked back at his friends, he realized that Bad had stopped and was now running the opposite way toward him. At the same time, Skeppy and Dream had just reached the door. As Dream noticed him on the ground, he frowned and turned back to run toward him. Before George could yell at them to stop, he saw the tranquilizer darts fly out. One hit Bad in the neck and he fell against the wall. One hit Dream in the arm, but despite it, he kept running. As the tranqs continued to hit him, George could only watch in hopelessness as Dream fell to his knees. Behind him, he realized Skeppy was caught in a similar dilemma.

His vision felt heavy, and slowly, his eyes began to close, and he only managed to reach his hand forward and enlace his fingers with Dream's collapsed hand. He felt Dream squeeze it just as the darkness took over.

Screaming.

Spine-chilling screaming reverberated across his body. Cold liquid surged through his veins. Needles pricked every cell in his body like they were edging at a pent-up mother box of energy rushing through his body.

George felt like he was lost in a void. Reality was caving in around him, and he was stuck in a vortex of emotions and memories. Past. Present. Future. They were all scrambled in his mind.

It was dark. The only thing he could hear were the echoes of his own thoughts trying to make sense of everything going on around him. And the voices. So many voices—all convoluted into a twister of puzzle pieces inside his mind.

What's wrong with me? Who am I?

I've hurt people. I didn't want to hurt them, but I did.

It feels like my head is about to explode with thoughts that aren't my own.

Have you considered that maybe they were wrong? Maybe it's time to embrace them.

Make it stop make it stopmakeitstopmake

"Let him go," the familiar voice echoed in between. George extended his arms and desperately pushed himself forward, reaching for it.

And with a gasp, he was awake.

He was breathing. He opened his eyes and the white light pointed at his face blinded him.

"Please. We'll do anything you want, just... let him go, please," Dream's desperate voice awakened a need to protect within George.

He tried to sit up, but he was strapped down by metal bars and his wrists were cuffed to the chair. There was a woman next to him toying with some syringes on a lab table. Another man was beside him, pointing a tiny flashlight at his pupils and making him blink profusely. He tried to speak, but his mouth was gagged. His vision kept going in and out like at any second, he would slip back into his darkened daze.

He made eye contact with Dream who was banging on the glass of his cell and watching him with desperation in his eyes. Skeppy and Bad were in similar positions on the two cells beside his—all with muters cuffed to their wrists.

"Dr. Patel, please— stop this," Bad insisted. His voice was fuzzy. George could only catch onto bits and parts of it and assume the rest. Both of his palms were pressed against the glass and his eyebrows were creased together in concern. "W— cooperate."

"I'm sorry, Bad." Dr. Patel sighed as she readied the syringe in her hands. "Metapsychics— likely than— lose their sanity and hurt people— his abilities will serve a good cause."

“What kind— good cause is murdering— Psychic?” asked Skeppy.

“600 miligrams of pentobarbital—” Dr. Patel told the man beside her. She stood in front of him and tied a plastic band around George’s upper arm. George’s eyes were wide with panic as he struggled against his restraints, but it wasn’t of much use considering his body was heavy and the metal bands were restrained hard around his torso and chest.

Dr. Patel turned to his friends. “I assure— not murdering him. Murder assumes unlawful actions— You broke into government— violent intentions. You attacked— have the right to self-defense— whose to believe three fugitives who worked with a terrorist group to orchestrate the murder of an important government figure?”

Tears brimmed in the corners of George’s eyes. He stared up at Dr. Patel as she turned back to her metal cart with all her tools. She avoided his eyes.

“We don’t even know if Bryan— it was a fucking accident. George didn’t go— intention to hurt anyone. George would never hurt anyone,” Dream said, his voice growing more strained as he spoke. Dream’s gaze pricked into George’s soul with such hurt he wished he could break free of his restraints and ravage the place. But all he could do instead was sob and struggle against the chair as he stared at his hopeless friend from afar.

“I know you love your friend, Dream, but George— a Metapsychic, in fact. Only a handful of Metapsychics have— all of whom destroyed their lives on their own— If he unleashes the true extent of his power, who knows how many— hurt.”

She made eye contact with him for the first time. It was a cold and stern gaze that he was all too familiar with, one that only saw him as a monster. It released a bout of anger out of him and made him struggle hard against his restraints, trying to curse her out. George couldn’t stand that look anymore.

“I’m sure you’ve heard of Aether.”

“I don’t fucking care about the other Psychics who’ve turned bad. George has always been scared of hurting— never hurt anyone— not like that!”

Dr. Patel let out a deep breath. “That just means his powers haven’t taken a hold of him yet, Dream. But trust me, they will.” She turned to the other scientist. “Administer the doses.”

George’s eyes met Dream’s from across the room. He saw the way his best friend shouted out something inaudible. The way tears slipped from the corners of his eyes as he desperately slammed the glass. The way he disappeared behind the tall man who stood before him, pushing down on his arm as he stuck the needle in.

He managed to get one last look at Dream when the man moved aside—Dream on his knees punching the glass with even more despair. Dream as he mouthed three words that echoed through his mind.

I love you.

George’s world went dark.

The next time he opened his eyes, he was once again floating in his dark abyss. He could hear muffled voices in the background, screams even. But this time, they were too far from his reach. And slowly, he floated farther and farther until he could no longer hear a thing.

The silence was the most dreadful thing about the place. So long had the voices in his head been plaguing him. So long had he been stuck wondering which thoughts and emotions belonged to him and which didn't. And now, he heard nothing. There was only silence.

George hated it.

He closed his eyes and he wished. Slowly, it came to him. The distant echo of a clock miles away, barely discernible. He opened them and he desperately drifted toward the sound.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

He was almost there.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

It was so loud.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

He could see a light.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

It was getting closer. Brighter.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

He was in a room.

The walls were painted a calming pastel blue that reminded George of the sky. There was a window by the bookshelves, but it was too bright to see out of. The smell in the room was a familiar lavender air freshener. At the corner, a grandfather clock was ticking.

There were two white sofas facing each other. Besides the potted plant in the corner and the bookshelves, there was no other furniture in the room. Not even portraits hung on the walls. He didn't recognize it as any place he had been before.

He sat down on the sofa, and before him, the image of a shadowy figure flashed into his vision like the light of an old camera. He had to squint his eyes hard to make out who it was.

"Sarah?"

Sarah smiled. Gently, she removed her glasses and folded them, placing them on the spot on the sofa beside her. Then she locked eyes with him again and said, "Not quite."

The chill of a presence edged at his shoulders. And momentarily, he blinked his eyes closed and took a deep breath. He looked behind him and then realized she was there too, this time faced away from him to stare at the grandfather clock.

"Who are you?"

"I'm your psyche."

“My psyche?” His stomach was swirling. He gulped down and clutched his necklace. There was a strange comfort in the familiarity of the room. Though, at the same time, he felt on edge. It was the same feeling from his nightmares, that coldness that wrapped around him and set off unpleasant goosebumps across every part of his skin. “What do you mean?”

“Just,” Sarah sighed. “Think of me as your Psychic abilities.”

“But... you’re a person.”

“Not quite. I might look like a person right now, but I’m just a creation your mind fabricated. It’s the only way your human brain has figured out to communicate with your Psychic self, the only way we can have a conversation.” She laughed. “And we’re long due for a conversation, don’t you think?”

“Why are you...” His eyes traced down her body with uncertainty. “Wearing Sarah?”

She laughed. “I should be asking you that question. Your subconscious chose this host. Why? I’m not quite sure. Maybe she’s the closest thing to a mentor you have. Maybe she’s the authority figure you trust the most. Maybe she’s the person you thought of last as they put your body into a coma.”

His breath hitched. “I’m in a coma?”

Sarah nodded. Her finger reached forward to trace the top frame of the clock. “It’s the only way they can put us to sleep—so we don’t fight back.”

“How did I end up, um.” He looked around. “Wherever we are?”

“We’re in your Psychic space. Your mind usually takes the scene of a memory with a strong emotion attached to it.”

“But I don’t recognize this place?”

“Look again, George.”

George furrowed his eyebrows. His eyes traced the room carefully—passed over the two bookshelves against the wall, the plant in the corner, the grandfather clock. He froze. On the face of the clock, he noticed a distinct design. It was a bird swirling around itself like it was caving into its own body.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

“I’m in that room from the facility we’re under... but, I’ve never actually seen it like this. How is it possible that this is my memory?”

“The Psychic mind works in mysterious ways, George. We don’t just feel emotions, we physically and mentally experience them with our whole bodies. We don’t think our thoughts, we hear them and take them from the minds of others. We can get in their heads and take from them their most vulnerable parts—break them apart and read them like they’re scripts they’ve been given. Our memories and sometimes those of others are jumbled between the past, present, and future. We see things before others can. We see things that could or could not happen, and we can change the future that way. It’s the reason people fear us.”

George felt the dread of all those memories overcome him. He grasped his pendant tight and closed his eyes. A tear slipped through his eyelashes and slid down his cheek. “I don’t want people

to fear me. I just want to be normal.”

Sarah stayed quiet. And when he felt a hand grasp the one on his lap, George opened his eyes and then realized she was sitting right next to him.

“You hurt me, George,” she said. Her voice was quiet and croaky like she had been crying.

“You’ve wanted to get rid of me for so long. You’ve pushed me to the side for what? In favor of them? Those people out there who are constantly hurting you? The ones who would never accept you even if they managed to make you “normal”? The ones who would prefer to lock you up in a white cell or chain you down instead of helping you live? Why?”

George stared at her with his mouth agape, unsure of what to say or how to refute her. After a minute, she looked forward. George could see the tears slipping down her cheeks. “All you’ve ever done is painted me as the villain.”

He blinked and the room was engulfed in darkness and blood dripping down from the sides of the walls, broken objects, and shredded cushions on the sofa. And she was a shadow. His heart dropped and he scrambled away from his chair, fell on his back as he tried to move away from the growing shadow that towered above him when she stood up. He blinked once and the room was back to normal.

Sarah was sitting on the sofa still, turned away from him and crying. He was on the floor, panting like a mad dog trying to keep his heartbeat steady. She turned and met his eyes.

“You make up these monsters, and you leave me in here—with them.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize-” His words died in his mouth.

Sarah stood up. She looked like she was about to say something, but she didn’t have time as the room began to tremble and pieces of the ceiling began to crumble. Sarah fell to her knees, her bun falling loose and her long hair shrouding her face entirely. Her glasses fell from the sofa and shattered.

“What’s happening?” George shouted over the noise of the earthquake around them.

“They’re starting the procedure. They want to extract the Delta energy from your mind. Once they do.” She looked up, a desperate gaze peering into him. “It’s over for both of us.”

This couldn’t be.

He was at the edge of losing his best friend. His best friend who was sitting on a chair unconscious a few feet from him, and Dream couldn’t do a thing to save him. He had tried everything. But the glass was unbreakable. Reason was not getting through to these fuckers. He had even tried pleading and asking for them to do anything but what they were about to do.

Dream was about to lose his best friend and there was nothing he could do about it.

He banged on the glass. He screamed and shouted so loud his own ears were ringing. He kicked the glass so hard his foot was numb from the pain.

“Dr. Patel! You don’t have to do this!” Bad shouted. He was still trying to appeal to her sense of morality, but it was clear she had closed off her emotions a long time ago. She was willing to take a

soul for nothing besides the glory of the experiment or whatever other fucked up reason she had planned. He didn't care. All Dream cared about was that his friend was at the edge of death and this woman was the reason.

"You're killing an innocent person for nothing and you're running extraction treatments on innocent Photos for who knows what!" Skeppy exclaimed.

"You boys don't understand what we're doing here."

"Then tell us," Bad pleaded. "There has to be a better option that doesn't involve killing our friend!"

The woman slammed her scalpel on the table and turned to them. It was only then that Dream realized she was crying—and it only made him feel sicker. Why would she have the nerve to cry when she was the one trying to murder their best friend?

"We're saving lives. Those Photomentalists have come to us willingly because they want to contribute to our cause and they get rewarded for it."

"Saving lives? You're about to kill our friend!" said Skeppy. "And you kidnapped Bad and other students for your sick plan!"

"I've made it my life goal to protect EMs. I never intended this to be the way, but if I have to do it for the greater good, I will."

"You have no fucking remorse," Dream told her through gritted teeth.

Dr. Patel stared straight through him, gripping the scalpel tightly in her fist before it fell from her hands. She lowered her head.

"It's easy for you to say that, Dream. You're a healthy EM with no idea of what's going on in the world, blinded by your privilege."

"I'm not a murderer like you."

"Tell me, Dream, if you were in my position, a doctor tasked with the responsibility to cure a silent killer that's been taking the lives of young EMs all over the world, all because they've been born with a deficiency without a cure, only temporary treatments that leave the victims suffering for the few years of their life that they have left. If you could sacrifice a person for them, would you do it?"

Dream gritted his teeth as he glowered at her. His heart was beating out of his chest, and clenching his fists so hard his nails dug into his skin, he said, "You're making excuses! If a disease like that existed, we'd know about it!"

Dr. Patel shook her head. "It's been hidden from the world for too long now." She laughed humorlessly. "Bullshit excuses about widespread panic and rise in hate crimes against EMs. The truth is, they don't want us to know we're on the verge of extinction. EMs have a short time before it becomes a common disease."

She was lying. Dream's eyes landed on George's limp body on the chair. Angry tears slid down his cheeks.

"What are you talking about?" Bad stuttered.

“D3, Bad. The real reason we’ve brought you here. We’ve been trying to find a cure for years. The government funded PDZ but we needed live subjects to explore how EMs produce the Delta energy needed to use their powers. All over the world, kids are being born without it, and by the time they’re supposed to be able to use their abilities, they can’t. Their body grows sick without it and we’ve only managed to develop temporary regenerative treatments to prolong their lives with our research here, but for what? Only for them to die in pain?”

“But why would you want to kill George?”

“Master Psychics. For years, we’ve believed they were key to curing this disease. But our first project failed. We haven’t had a powerful enough subject to finalize the treatment.” She turned toward George. “We haven’t encountered a Metapsychic in decades. His brain is the key to finding our cure.”

Dream shook his head insistently and fell to his knees, his angry stare dissipating into a look of desperation. “George is innocent. He doesn’t deserve this, just… please, he would want to work willingly with you. You don’t have to kill him!”

“You underestimate the lengths the Psychic brain will go to to protect itself, Dream. A Metapsychic? They’re bound to let their urges control them, and it often ends with death all around them.” She locked eyes with him. “And they suffer. They suffer because they don’t want to be this primal, selfish being willing to hurt for their own welfare, but they can’t help it. Do you think your friend would want to turn into that?”

“George would never do that.” Dream’s vision grew blurry and he wiped his eyes with the back of his hands to see better. His voice cracked. “He can control his powers. I know he can.”

“The Metapsychic inside him? It’s not your friend, Dream. Trust me.” Her gaze lowered. “I know.”

He pressed his knuckles against the glass and slammed it once and then twice and then repeatedly until all he could hear were the sounds of bone striking glass and his knuckles were bruised and raw with red gashes. Facing the ground, he squeezed his eyes tight and tried to control his breathing. His fists burned, and he pressed them to the floor.

“Please.”

“Please.”

George stared at Sarah. She was on her knees barely able to hold her own weight with her palms spread over the tiles.

“You have to let me out, George. If you do, it will spur your powers to awaken you from your coma. We’ll have enough time to escape. Your instincts will kick in and protect us. But if you don’t, we’ll both die.”

“But I— I can’t control it.”

“I will take control, George.” Sarah looked up at him with a pleading stare and raised her hand for him to take it. “I’ll protect us.”

“But my friends…”

Sarah looked at him with a pleading gaze. “Please, George. Everything will be alright. We’re

strong. We'll get through this."

George swallowed. The ceiling cracked. The concrete above them crumbled. His life flashed before him. And without thinking further, he took her hand.

It's funny, really—how difficult it is to suppress those parts of you that you despise.

You go about your life with an invisible boulder strapped to your shoulders. Yet people continue to ask more of you. They ask you to pretend. They ask you to try harder. They ask you to "be yourself."

But when "being yourself" means bringing out the part of you that's been damned by society, what option do you have left? When you're torn between listening to those who hold more power over you, the ones who "know what's best" for you, and your deepest self, the one you've learned to hate and suppress because everyone's told you you must, there's no winning then.

This was the moment George decided that he was never going to win—he had never been meant to win. No matter how desperately he attempted to retain those sides of him, people would only ever continue to condemn him. So if other people didn't matter, it only left him with one option.

George decided to let go.

It was euphoric—these currents of power interlacing with every part of him. He could hardly feel his body. It was like floating through an endless ocean of bright light with no disruption in sight. Nothing could hurt him here—he was invincible. He was finally free.

And then he opened his eyes and it was like looking at himself from the end of a long tunnel. He could see his body floating in the air, his eyes closed like he was immersed into a deep slumber. His arms and legs were extended. He wished he could stay like this forever. So peaceful. So free.

But as every good thing does, it came to an end.

Slowly, the image of him in the distance grew bigger and bigger. He opened his eyes and...

Chaos.

His ears were ringing. He couldn't feel his body. His head was swirling. But then he realized the world was the one swirling around him. Metal plates, tools, chairs, glass, papers, all flying in a vortex that he was caught in the middle of. He couldn't move. He could only see Dr. Patel on the floor in front of him, a horrified expression on her face as she screamed something.

His hearing returned with a crash, and he could finally tell apart the shrieking and the flying objects all slamming against each other as they circulated the air around him.

"George," Dream shouted. In the background, he could hear Skeppy and Bad shouting too, but he could hardly make their voices out with the ruckus going on.

George tried to turn his head toward the sound, but his body was acting on its own accord. He rose higher toward the ceiling. Dr. Patel tried to scramble away, but George's hand extended forward in a split second and suddenly she was floating in the air in front of him.

"Let go of me," she screeched and struggled like there was an invisible cord around her torso.

“Let her go, George,” Dream shouted.

Let her go, he shouted in his mind.

She’s trying to kill us, his psyche told him. *I’m only doing what’s necessary.*

“This isn’t you. Don’t prove them right, George.”

He felt the panic overtaking him. He tried to squeeze his eyes shut and take back his body but it was like no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t expel the force taking control of him. This wasn’t the deal.

This is for your own good.

Dr. Patel’s body fell limp. Her eyes turned white, and slowly, his psyche released her. And to George’s horror, she stood firm on both feet, knelt down to grab a ripped cord from the ground, and began to wrap it around her neck.

Stop it. You don’t get to decide that.

“George, I know you’re in there. You can take control.”

She began to pull. Her eyebrows were creased and there were tears flowing down her cheeks, but even then, she only pulled tighter. From the corner of his eye, he could see Dream in his peripheral vision. Despite all the objects flying around and slamming against each other, he walked into the vortex, reaching his hand up to reach for George.

George wanted to scream at him to back away—scream that it wasn’t safe, but his voice wasn’t working.

“Please, George. If you kill her, you’re only going to prove them right. You’re going to be taken in. You’ll lose your life for certain this time. Think about what you’re doing.”

When Dream managed to catch hold of his foot, his psyche released its hold on Dr. Patel and snapped his head toward Dream. He threw him back with a force that sent him crashing into the ruins of the broken cell. Dream fell with a grunt and then sat up, staring at George like an idiot instead of running away. George levitated toward him, and the closer he got, the more desperate he got to gain control.

Stop it!

“Please—” Dream managed before a cord that had been flying in the air snapped around his neck in less than a second. Dream barely managed to hold onto it to keep himself from choking, and seeing as he was still wearing the muters, he barely had any strength to force it away from his neck.

George’s heart dropped and as Dream struggled to take big breaths, George tried everything in his power to expel the stranger in his body. But nothing was working. Everything was fuzzy and it felt like he was losing himself in the overwhelming energy flowing through his body. All he had left to do was to plead.

Please, stop it! Let go of him! He’s my friend!

He’s trying to keep you from getting rid of the woman who tried to kill us. Face it, George. He’s only ever held you back. He’s not your friend. He’s only been using you to make him feel better about himself.

“I believe in you, George,” Dream managed.

The image of Dream began to come in flashes—grew blurrier by the second. The sounds of screaming and the commotion going on around him were beginning to fade. He was losing himself in the static of his brain. He blinked and he was outside his body again. He was staring at himself... getting further and further away.

Please, just, please, let him go. I can't take this anymore.

Desperately, he reached for the last tie he had to his body. He pulled hard and fast, trying to recover himself. But it was useless. He would never get there. It was only a matter of time. It had only ever been a matter of time. This was all his fault.

I'm only trying to protect us.

You're not protecting me! You're not me! You wouldn't be hurting my best friend if you were! Give me my body back!

He doesn't love you, George. He can't protect you like I can. He'll only put us in more danger. One day, you'll understand. I exist solely for you.

“George!” He caught onto Dream’s gaze. His gold eyes were glossed over. His eyebrows were creased with desperation. There were tears streaming down his face as he desperately tried to pull the cord away from his neck.

And despite it all—despite George being the one strangling him and trying to take his life. George could still see the tender glint in his eyes that Dream had always reserved for him, the one he’d spent all those years appreciating—loving. The one that had always confused him and that he had spent so much time ruminating on, wondering: why him?

“I’d never be afraid of you, George.”

I'm not afraid of you.

It was all it took.

He gasped out. He opened his eyes. The objects around him froze in the air and fell to the ground, shattering and clanking on the floors. He heard Bad scream his name. George fell to his knees, feeling the smooth floor below his palms, breathing the alcohol scattered through the air, feeling his body as his own once more.

For a second, nobody said anything.

George was facing down, trying to catch his breath, and keeping his palms flush against the floor in case they fought back. His eyes were closed tight. He pushed the nagging voice to the back of his mind and refused to let it take control.

This body was his.

“George,” Dream shouted and George heard his footsteps run for him, felt his arms wrap around his shoulders and pull him tight against his chest, felt his fingers thread through his hair and caress him tight like it was their last moment alive. Like it was just Dream and George.

Dream’s nose dug into his hair and he sniffled against him, hugging him tighter and tighter each time. George held onto him just as desperately, sobbing into his shirt and muttering “I’m so sorry”

over and over again like it was his forever mantra.

“It’s okay,” Dream said and then kissed the top of his head and rubbed his back tenderly. “George, it’s okay.”

George’s fingers wrinkled around the material of Dream’s shirt. He couldn’t let go. He was desperate to feel Dream’s warm body against him, feel his heart beating against his own. Alive. He couldn’t let go.

“You’re going to be okay.” Dream cradled his body back and forth like they were lost in a ship swaying in the ocean. “Shush,” he murmured. “Shush, baby, you’ll be okay. You’re okay. We’re okay.”

“I almost killed you.” George’s voice was hoarse and broken, barely a breath. “I’m so sorry, Dream. I love you. I’m sorry.”

“George!” Dream reached his hands down to clutch his waist and he buried his nose down to George’s neck. “It’s over, George. Everything’s going to be okay. I’m okay. It’s over.”

“It’s over,” George managed to whisper.

“It’s over,” Dream repeated.

“I love you.”

“I love you too, you idiot,” Dream laughed. George felt that warmth radiating from his aura, engulfing them in an invincible high, embraced with soft kisses and gentle hushes. Dream’s voice cracked from where he was crying. “I love you so much.”

George felt someone place their hand on his shoulder. Skeppy’s voice came from beside them. “Guys, we really need to get out of here.”

The door burst open. When George pulled away, his eyes searched the room for Dr. Patel and he saw her standing weakly beside the door, rubbing her neck and glaring at them. He spotted the armed men rushing in, and then he heard the alarms were blaring. He wasn’t sure how long they’d been blaring, but they were.

That’s when he realized how deep of a situation they were in.

Well...

“Shit,” Skeppy finished for him.

Chapter End Notes

If you haven't cried yet, I'm determined to make at least 10% of y'all cry with the next chapter so get your tissues ready!

The stream will most likely take place this Thursday around 6 PM CT but I haven't finalized the date, you can send in your questions/things you want me to talk about/address [here](#).

Next chapter is either for tomorrow or Monday! Follow my twitter for updates. Love y'all! :D

Light <3

[tumblr](#) & [twitter](#)

Aether's Legacy

Chapter Notes

Thank you Grass and Grav <3 This has been such a journey!!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Catch them!" Dr. Patel shouted as Dream helped George to his feet.

"Hey, George, it would be a great time for—" Bad didn't get a chance to finish his sentence as the armed men began shooting tranqs from their guns, all of which George stopped mid-air as the four backed up toward the door behind them.

They managed to get out just as the guards chased behind them. George's heart was pounding in his ears. Dream's hand was grasping his own tightly as they hurried through the hallways, alarms blaring in the background and shouts coming from behind them.

"They locked the doors," Skeppy shouted as he attempted to burst the emergency door to the staircase open.

George could hear the guards' footsteps behind them, and he barely managed to create a telekinetic force field to protect them from the incoming darts, though it would only be a matter of time before he was too weak to continue holding it.

He strained to keep the force field up and asked, "Any ideas would be helpful now!"

Dream was slamming against the door in an attempt to burst it open, but without his strength, the action was rendered useless.

"We need to find a different way," Bad exclaimed.

As he did, George's empathy caught onto a familiar approaching aura. An image flashed in his mind. His adrenaline kicked in. It was enough for him to spin his head and shout, "Get away from the door!" at Bad and Skeppy before releasing the force field and tackling Dream to the ground.

One second and the door exploded off its frame. It flew forwards and hit a few of the guards in the front of the line, catching the others by surprise. Smoke dispersed from the sudden explosion, and George looked up to see two familiar figures standing with confident smirks and tranquilizer guns.

"UNO REVERSE," Tommy shouted at full volume and began screaming.

"Take this you fuckers," exclaimed Wilbur.

Some of the guards fell to the ground unconscious while others retreated with their shields to block out the gunfire.

George could hardly process the situation when he felt someone pull him to his feet, and when he turned, he could hardly believe his eyes.

"Don't look at me with that stupid face and just give me a hug you jerk," Sapnap said and pulled

him into an embrace.

“Sapnap!” Dream threw his arms around the both of them and pulled them in tight, gaining a cackle from the two.

George’s heart still felt like it was about to burst out of his chest. Behind Sapnap, the smoke was clearing and he could see Techno by the door leading Skeppy and Bad out. He turned to them and shouted, “You better get your asses out of here before the cops get here! We ain’t stayin’ for long.”

“Come on,” Sapnap said as he pushed both of them toward the door.

George glanced over his shoulder in time to see Tommy and Wilbur backing away as Sapnap set off a ring of fire to keep the remaining guards away as they rushed out toward the surface.

The run up the flights and flights of stairs was a blur, and when George finally got a peek at the sunlight outside, he felt himself breathe easier. It was only then that he felt his knees buckle under him from the exhaustion and he fell into Dream’s arms. The world was spinning. Everyone talking wasn’t helping his condition either, and he was hardly able to differentiate their words.

They had emerged from a small building in the middle of the forest at the side of a lone road. Fundy’s van was parked beside them, and he spotted Phil who was tending to a wound on Skeppy’s arm and Fundy who was speaking really fast and typing something onto his tablet.

Next to them, Bad asked, “How did you even find us!?”

Sapnap pulled away from their hug and replied, “Dream’s tablet. Fundy managed to track it. Figured you’d need help, but we didn’t expect to find y’all at the door.”

George looked toward Dream with a questioning gaze. Dream responded with a smile. “I turned the location on when we got inside in case we’d run into trouble.”

“Yeah, well your back-up saved your butt.”

“How did you even get out of the hospital?” George asked.

Sapnap sent him a coy smile and laughed. “Come on, dude, you underestimate my abilities.”

George could sense something beneath his aura that he wasn’t telling them, but he figured it wasn’t the time to push the subject.

“That’s because you’re an idiot.”

“Really feeling the love, Georgie,” Sapnap replied.

“The police are on their way,” Fundy announced. “They’ll be here in a few minutes. We’ve gotta get out of here if we don’t want to end up behind bars.”

Phil opened the back of the van to let them in. George couldn’t get himself to move. When Dream stepped forward, George held his hand and pulled him back. Dream turned back and stared at him through furrowed eyebrows.

“We have to stay and tell the police the truth,” George said. “If we leave, they’ll probably take the students somewhere else and they might get away with what they’re doing.”

“What about us?” Sapnap asked.

“We can’t hide forever,” George said. “They’ll be after us...” He shut his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. “After me. I need to stay. I’m a liability.”

When he opened his eyes, Dream was right in front of him. He was giving him a soft smile that nearly melted George on the spot. “Then we’ll stay with you.” They looked toward Phil whose eyes were tracing over each of them.

Smiling, Phil nodded. “Whatever you decide. If you need us, we’re always free to help.”

“Meh, that depends on what our schedule looks like,” Tommy added which Techno slapped him for. George and the others laughed.

They could hear the police sirens approaching in the distance.

“You should go,” Dream told them.

Nodding, Phil pushed Tommy in and then jumped in himself. With a parting two-finger salute, Techno loaded in right behind them. Wilbur was the last one to step in, flashing them a smile and saying, “Don’t go and get yourselves kidnapped again, lads. Good luck.”

The back of the van closed and they drove off, leaving the five of them beside the building in silence. Dream turned to George and took him by the hands. He smiled like an idiot, and George couldn’t believe this was the guy he had fallen in love with.

Sapnap groaned. “On second thought, maybe I should’ve gone with them. They’ve left me as the fifth wheel here.”

Dream laughed and pulled Sapnap into a hug while George rolled his eyes and muttered a, “you’re so stupid,” with his widest smile yet.

They told them everything.

The discovery of their missing friend. Their escape from the island. The accident at the grocery store. Their deal with the Bergman Defenders in exchange for finding the facility their friend was being kept in (they kept Skeppy and Sapnap out of that one). The accident with Mark Bryan. Their discovery of the illegal underground operation that had apparently been government-funded. Their torture—or more specifically George’s—inside the place and how they escaped because Sapnap showed up in time to save them.

“How do we know you’re not lying?” the chief of police inquired during his interrogation with George.

“There are students, minors, being kept in that facility right now and being lied to their faces. Go raid the place and find them yourselves, but I’m not going back in there after that woman tried to kill me.”

The woman was hesitant, but she sent off a team that arrived just in time to release the students and arrested Dr. Patel for unethical human experimentation and unauthorized lab operations. Later, George would find out that the government denied any collaboration with Dr. Patel and practically called her insane after the story was live on television all over the country. Although George could agree with the second part, he was doubtful about the first. He couldn’t say he was surprised, however, seeing as governments constantly swept huge events under the rug with a little bit of corruption and manipulation of the media, especially when it came to EM issues.

Headmaster O'Connor negotiated with the police and managed to get them out of major trouble with the law. George wasn't sure how, but he didn't want to find out.

He saw his parents for the first time after getting released.

"George," they exclaimed upon seeing him. They embraced him like they had almost lost him—perhaps they almost had. George couldn't contain the tears as his mother muttered rushed apologies and repeated that she loved him over and over. Or the way his father remained silent for most of the time but his glossy eyes and the way he clutched to George desperately was enough to tell him the same.

But ultimately, it was over. It was finally over. They had won.

"Pupils are normal. Blood pressure's fine. Blood tests have come back healthy. You seem okay," Jenna assured him as she turned off her flashlight. "Dr. Hernandez will be with you shortly."

She left George alone in the office. The curtains were wide open this time, and there was more light coming through. The lavender air freshener had once again been replaced with the cinnamon scent Sarah liked.

He felt out of place in the room, especially because it reminded him of what he'd seen in his head. He hadn't yet taken the time to contemplate what he'd discovered. Mostly, he was trying to avoid thinking about it. He could still feel his psyche in the back of his mind, pent-up with rage and wanting an escape.

But for now, it was quiet. George felt a strange calmness in his own mind. He felt comfortable—something he hadn't ever experienced in his own body. For once, he felt in control.

Not only that but now that he was back in AGE, he felt safe yet again. Even though the island hadn't been the kindest to him, George was comfortable there. It was his home. He had met his friends here. He had learned about his powers here. He had Sarah. He trusted the place enough to know they were at least trying to help him.

After witnessing everything out there, after losing trust in his own body and being violated by a group of mad scientists who were clearly doing the wrong thing for the right reasons (at least from what Dream had explained), George felt like he could return to normal, especially now that he knew he was capable of controlling his psyche. Perhaps here, Sarah would be able to help him come to terms with it. Maybe then, he wouldn't have to fight his own abilities. Maybe then, he would be able to work with them.

The door opened, and her heels clinked against the floor as she moved forward. George looked up to lock eyes with Sarah. Admittedly, it was weird seeing her here. Real this time.

"George," she greeted him with a smile. Then, she sat down in front of him where she always did. She placed her clipboard on the coffee table and crossed her legs and her eyes traced over him like she couldn't believe he was here. There was something off about her aura. "A lot has happened since our last session."

George snorted. He gripped his knees and stared at the coffee table. "That's an understatement." He was quiet for a second before sighing deeply. "They called me a Metapsychic."

Sarah nodded. Her eyes were peering into him. George couldn't figure out what she was thinking. After another long breath of silence, she finally said, "I suspected it since your episode during Luna

Azul.”

George frowned and opened his mouth, but she continued before he could say anything.

“I didn’t tell you because the likelihood of it was extremely small. I was basing my theory on a hunch, and knowing how worried you get about your abilities, I figured it was only going to cause you to worry. If you turned out to be one, it would only be a matter of time before your powers manifested.”

“I can still feel it. It wants to come out.” George squeezed his eyes shut and tried to forget the image of Dream with a cord around his neck that was now engraved in his mind. “I’m scared I’ll lose control of it again.... That I’ll hurt the people I love the most.”

“When I told you that you had to stop fearing your abilities, George. I meant it. It’s the first step to truly being in tune with your body. You refer to that part of you as a separate entity, but it’s not, George. It’s a part of who you are. You can’t erase it.”

“You told me to hide it. It’s all anyone’s ever told me.”

Sarah pursed her lips. “I’m sorry, George. I shouldn’t have told you that. You misunderstood what I really meant. What I meant with containing wasn’t to hide your powers, it’s about not letting your powers control your actions. And clearly, you’re capable of that. Controlling the Metapsychic? It’s the hardest thing about it, George.”

The words that escaped him next were bitter and frustrated. “How would you know? You’re not one.” He hadn’t meant for it to come out that way. It wasn’t Sarah’s fault. She was just trying to help him.

Sarah got on her feet. For a moment, he thought he’d insulted her, but she didn’t leave. Instead, she walked over to the portrait of the first headmaster hung on the wall.

“You’re right. I’m not.” Her eyes bore into the portrait, but he wasn’t sure why she was staring at it. “But I know some things. The stories have been passed along through my family’s generations.”

Confused, he watched as she traced her finger over the face on the portrait. Her aura was nostalgic. It almost felt sad. “Stories?”

“My great-great grandmother founded this school.”

“What?” He stared at the portrait of the beautiful smiling woman, and for a second, a picture flashed in his head. A younger version of her: her smile shining like the sun. And then, he was looking through her eyes. Looking at a girl beside her, dark-haired and soft smile. He could hear their laughter. He had felt this aura before—ingrained in the walls of the facility and behind the forest where the trees painted beams of sunlight into the decrepit building.

“Her name was Wendy, one of the first Extramundanes in the world. She had a twin sister who was one too.” Sarah turned and locked her gaze on him. “She was the first Psychic.”

George’s breath hitched.

“Wendy loved her sister, but unfortunately, she suffered the most. In the end, she hated the person she became after she succumbed to her powers, and she lost herself because of her instability. My great-great grandmother remembered her with fondness. Others? Not so much.” Sarah crossed her arms and exhaled. Her gaze was distant. “Today, we only know her as Aether.”

“Aether was... in your family?”

Sarah only nodded.

“That’s why you know so much about her legends and my powers?”

“Yes, George. It’s why I warned you to be careful. Psychics, especially high-level ones, are much more sensitive to alarming situations. It’s easy to let your psyche take control when all you’re focused on is surviving.”

“How do you know that word?”

“I’ve spent longer than you know helping and studying Psychics, George. Psyches don’t generally manifest in lower type Psychics, but higher types have a greater chance of encountering theirs.” She returned to her seat where she took her clipboard and jotted down a few words.

George nodded and took a glance around the room. “Why did you change your air freshener again?” He found himself asking to lighten the conversation.

“My air freshener?”

“It was lavender the last time,” he said as he stared at it from across the room.

Her pen clanked against the clipboard. “I haven’t changed my air freshener in years, George.”

George turned to her in confusion. “Oh,” he muttered.

And then, a curious question that had been brewing in his mind came to him. “What I don’t understand is, if you thought Bad and the others were only taken away because they were sick, why would you be worried about me going to look for him?”

She pondered the question for a moment. “After being on the island for so long, I figured it would be hard for you to navigate through the real world, especially with everything that’s been going on.”

It was sincere—that he knew. But there was something else. George swallowed, unsure if he really wanted to prod at it. And deep down, he felt he knew the answer, but he wasn’t sure he wanted confirmation of it. Especially because Sarah had always been the one adult he had put the most trust in when it came to helping him.

“Is that really it?”

Sarah froze.

George felt sick in his stomach. “Did you... did you know they were lying about Bad being sick?”

When she didn’t answer, it all but confirmed his suspicion. George swallowed like there was a rock stuck in his throat, but he was unable to get it out. His fingers clenched around the fabric of his pants. His gaze was rooted to the floor. His breathing quickened.

She knew. Sarah knew about Project Delta Z. She knew and she’d done nothing about it. Sarah, who was one of the most caring staff at AGE. Sarah who had supported him the most throughout his years. Sarah who claimed to put the students before everything else. Sarah who had known he was a Metapsychic and hadn’t warned him about the possibility of a breakdown. Sarah who had let him break into a facility where he was strung to a metal chair and forced into a coma.

Sarah, who had the audacity to tell him to calm down while his friend was shipped off to a facility to be treated as a lab rat.

Unable to form any other answer, he only managed to stutter out a broken “why?”

She kept her tone monotone, and it only managed to rile him up further—the fact that she was acting so nonchalant about the situation when she, out of all people, knew the pain of EM experimentation. Her own family had gotten the worst of it for fuck’s sake. And here she was, betraying her ancestry and sending off children like white mice to be prodded at.

“It wasn’t my decision to make George. When I found out, I told them I couldn’t keep it to myself. But they threatened to take me out of my position. If that happened, I’d have no chance of stopping the operation. Worst of all, I wouldn’t be able to make sure the kids were taken care of properly.” Her eyes closed. The shame that drowned the room was sickening. “I had to volunteer to help them, and I had to keep my mouth shut. It’s why I didn’t want you to investigate. It could’ve potentially set off your powers and knowing the possibility of you being a Metapsychic, I thought I’d—”

“You thought you’d what?” George spat. His chest felt heavy, and he could hardly keep his breathing steady from the indignation fueling him. “Control me? Protect me? You lied to me! Not just about my powers but also about my friend. We could’ve prevented all of the shit we went through! But you decided you knew what was better for me. You decided I wasn’t capable of making my own decisions. You decided I was too unstable to even live my own life! It was always you!”

Angry tears flooded the corners of his eyes. He wiped them away in frustration and then got on his feet, condemning her with a single look.

He was done being controlled. He was done letting other people decide what was best for him. He was done letting them rule his life. Letting them hurt him.

George was done.

“Well guess what, you got your fucking wish! I’m a disaster because of you all. You’ve made me into what I am, and I don’t fucking care about listening to all of you “experts” anymore. All you do is hurt! You take away people’s choices and you make them suffer by making them think it’s their fault! It’s not my fucking fault I’m a Metapsychic. It’s not my fucking fault I’m unstable! You’re the ones who made me fear my own powers in the first place—to want to tuck them away and pretend I was a different person. And for years, I suffered with the consequences of that!”

“George, just—”

Instead of listening, he stomped toward the door. Clutching the handle and then bursting it open. He stopped for a moment, breathing in hard and heavy. “I’m done letting other people tell me how to control my powers. You don’t know shit about me. And you certainly don’t fucking care enough to let me decide how I live.”

He ended up at his tree later, letting the evening sun warm his skin and the breeze tickle around him. It took some time, but his anger receded. All that was left was betrayal nagging at his chest. It weighed him into the ground, and George found himself toying with the loose tree roots under him yet again like he’d always done when he was upset.

He clutched his gem with the other hand and stared off into the distance like he was looking into a vast emptiness. He didn't even have the energy to cry anymore. Now, all that he was left with was a void of emotion.

"George?" The familiar voice instantly made him tense. He looked up at Dream who was staring down at him with a beautiful softness drowning his gaze. "What's wrong?" Dream slumped down beside him and let their shoulders touch.

George shrugged. "I'm just tired of my powers."

Dream's response was instant and heavy with concern. It made George's heart flutter. "Did something happen?"

"No." He swallowed and thought for a moment. His fingers tightened around his necklace. Then, he let go.

He locked eyes with Dream. "I'm tired of pretending they're not a part of who I am."

Dream was quiet for a moment. George felt him shift closer, and when he glanced over, the sappy beam that Dream was sending him made him want to melt into the earth. His cheeks flushed with heat.

"What?"

"Nothing. It's just that." Dream's smile widened. The crinkles at the edges of his mouth looked like little ripples of heatwaves in the summer. His next words made George's face grow even hotter. "I've been waiting years for you to say that."

George raised an eyebrow. "Really? Why didn't you just tell me in that case?"

Dream wheezed his little tea kettle laugh and George thought about the way Dream's laughter made everything feel worth it.

"Because." Dream enlanced their fingers together and squeezed. He smiled at him with that sparkle in his eyes that George had engraved in his mind—the one that could make him smile for days on end. "You're so stubborn you wouldn't have believed it even if I repeated it a thousand times."

George hummed, leaning closer to his face and glimpsing down at his lips for a second. He smiled. "Am I? Well. You might have to repeat it to me every day now so I don't forget."

"You're such an idiot." His voice was but a breath that tickled George's face pleasantly. George pursed his lips, maintaining their distance as he pondered his next move.

"Earlier, you said you loved me," George said.

"That I did."

"Would you say that," he paused, taking in the soft pink aura embracing the air around them and pulling them together. His thumb caressed the inside of Dream's hand from where he was still holding it. "That you love me more than a friend?"

For a second, Dream didn't speak. And his response was unexpected. He burst into laughter. He pulled his face away and wheezed like he was having an attack. George watched him in confusion, sounding embarrassed when he asked, "Why are you laughing?"

Dream shook his head and raised his other hand as if to ask for a moment. George pouted and tried to pull his hand away, but Dream placed his hands on his waist and pulled him close, making their noses bump together. His gaze was so intense George felt like his whole face was on fire. “I bend backwards for all your needs. We snuggle in bed almost every night. I practically treat you like my boyfriend in every aspect. We literally confess our love for each other after a crisis like we’re a part of some dramatic ass romance subplot in one of your dumb novels and you’re still asking if I like you!? George!”

George could imagine his face was probably so red it looked like a sunburn. At least, it certainly felt like one with the way Dream was staring at him like he was the only thing alive. “It’s not my fault I wanted confirmation!”

Dream rolled his eyes and knocked their foreheads together, letting out a gentle chuckle that George felt resonating through his body. “Well, there’s literally no other way to show you than this,” he said before pressing their lips together.

A tumult of warm colors and pleasant flutters spread through the whole of George. His arms wrapped around Dream’s neck to pull him closer despite already being the closest they could be. Dream’s hands clenched and unclenched around his waist repeatedly like he was making sure George was real—that he was really feeling what he was feeling.

They didn’t stop. Not even to take a breath. Every part of Dream was addicting. The smell of pine which made him feel like he was on a high. The tinge of sweets and desserts on his tongue that George wished he could taste for ages. The fluffy and soft hair that drowned George’s fingers.

Years of yearning melted into this single moment. Dream pulled him onto his lap. George placed his legs on either side of him, running his hands down his neck and shoulders and back and feeling him. Feeling him not only physically but also in soul. Feeling every part of him like this was their last moment together.

For the first time, there were no secrets, no barriers, nothing in between them. It was just them—just Dream and George.

When they separated, they were panting. Dream’s hair was tousled and spiking in different directions. George’s shirt was crinkled and crooked. Dream’s cheeks were drowned in color and his pupils were dilated and immersed in such a fervent passion that George thought they’d both combust into flames on the spot.

Neither said anything. Instead, George grazed his fingers under his chin. His skin was hot to the touch. George almost wished it was winter just so he could nestle against Dream and use his body as a heater, feel his heart thumping against George’s chest. George kissed him again, this one short and soft.

And then Dream returned the action. Again and again. On his lips. On his cheek. On his chin. On his neck. Until George was left a mess of giggles drowning in the intoxicating sensation of their auras cloaking them in silk.

Dream’s phone vibrated in his pocket, and in between kisses, he muttered, “Ignore it.”

George couldn’t tell how long they spent flushed against each other kissing and breathing the other’s essence, but once Dream’s phone started vibrating for the third time, he figured it was enough. They would have time later anyway.

He pulled away. “Answer it.”

Dream frowned like a scolded puppy and tried to give him one more kiss but George pressed a finger against his lips. “Answer it or I will.”

Groaning, he reached into his pocket and answered while George wrapped his arms around his torso and nuzzled his head into his neck. Dream placed a palm soft on his back and massaged him. “Hello?”

“Where the fuck are you!? The assembly’s about to start and Gali is looking everywhere for you!”

George snorted at the sound of Sapnap’s voice.

Dream opened his mouth to answer, but Sapnap interrupted him.

“Wait, are you with George!? I just heard him laugh! Hold on, are you two doing the dirty?” Sapnap exaggerated a gag. “Well I hate to interrupt y’all but y’all better get over here before Gali loses her temper and wolves out.”

Then, just like that, he hung up.

George and Dream stared at each other for a moment and then burst into laughter. They stood up and did their best to fix their appearances so they would look presentable before heading off to the assembly hall hand-in-hand.

“About fucking time,” Sapnap whisper-yelled when George slipped into the seat next to him, Dream right beside him.

Considering there were only a handful of dozens of students left in the school after they had cancelled the year (mostly international students, prefects, student workers, etc.), they were allowed to sit anywhere they wanted. On the stage, the headmaster was standing at the podium fixing the microphone. There were hushed whispers passing through the crowd. George couldn’t say he appreciated the looks he had continuously gotten from the people around him ever since they had arrived.

“Hey, guys,” Bad exclaimed as he took a seat in the row in front of them. Skeppy sat down next to him with a side smirk. Already, he seemed much more laid-back and calm since they had gotten back. He’d already played a few jokes on some of them—including planting a gigantic cake in Bad’s room that he’d spent an hour trying to figure out how not to step on (where Skeppy had obtained it from was the real question). George was glad to see him back to normal.

“Bad! Guess who can officially instead of unofficially start third-wheeling,” Sapnap said.

George scoffed and slapped his shoulder.

Upon seeing Dream’s wide grin and the way his hand was on top of George’s on his lap, Bad’s eyes went wide and he said, “Finally! I was wondering when you two would ask each other out!”

“Great, now they can be even more grossly PDA,” Skeppy commented with a gag.

“Skeppy!” Bad slapped his arm which drew out an exaggerated ‘ow.’ “Don’t worry, he’s happy for you guys.”

“So we got all these dating announcements coming along, when’s skephalo happening?” Dream teased.

Skeppy tensed and Bad's face took a crimson color. Dream, Sapnap, and George burst into laughter at it.

"Can I get your attention, everyone?" the headmaster called from the stage. The auditorium quieted down. He cleared his throat and traced the room, his eyes stopping at where George and his friends were sitting momentarily before continuing. Motionless, George looked up toward the stage with a blank stare. Dream's thumb grazed the back of his hand gently.

"I am sure you are all aware that I have recently made a very serious error and that a terrible situation has taken place."

"Understatement of the fucking year," Dream muttered under his breath.

"I've acted irresponsibly. I have broken the oath I swore to uphold. I have put the safety of the student body at risk. Thus, I'm here to announce my resignation." An usher of gasps and mumbles broke out across the crowd. George and his friends glanced at each other unsuredly. "As of next year, I will no longer be the headmaster. In my place," he extended his arm, and a new figure stepped on stage. George grimaced. "Dr. Hernandez will officially be the new headmaster of AGE."

Sarah stood straight in her spot, a slight smile on her expression. Her eyes traced the crowd and landed on George—gave him that look of regret that George tore his gaze away from.

"Please, everyone, give her a round of applause."

George kept his hands on his lap as the auditorium burst into applause. The headmaster continued talking, but George could hardly listen. His brain felt like static, and he could hardly reserve any emotion toward her.

He had thought she cared. All those years, he'd thought she believed in him. But really, she never had. And despite knowing that, right now, George only felt an uncomfortable numbness washing over him. Right now, Dream and his friends surrounding him were the only beacons of light providing him warmth.

When the assembly ended, they made their way out of the auditorium without saying anything. They were about to head to the mess hall when the headmaster and Sarah stopped them.

"I'd like to speak to you four," the headmaster told them. "Follow me to my office, please."

George avoided making eye contact with Sarah despite feeling her gaze on him. As the headmaster began walking, Bad reassured them that they'd be okay and they followed behind with hesitance.

Once in his office, the headmaster began. "I'll be straight with you. Since you helped recover the missing students, you won't have a punishment for sneaking out of the island."

Sapnap and Skeppy cheered and high-fived each other, though O'Connor continued talking with a stern tone, "Unfortunately, due to all the mayhem you caused across the states, there will be consequences."

George knew what was coming. He had denied it for so long now. And despite it, he couldn't reserve an emotion for it. No anger. No fear. He wasn't sure what was worse—the way he'd dreaded this moment his whole life or the way he'd been torn and tugged so much he had no energy left to feel anything at the thought of it.

"What kind?" Dream was the first to ask.

“Well.” He cleared his throat and glanced in between Skeppy and Sapnap. “There is no clear evidence that you two were working with the Bergman Defenders, thus, I managed to only set up a deal of a hundred hours of community service for you.”

His eyes landed on Dream next. “I can’t say the same for you, Dream. Since you are a minor, you won’t get into any legal proceedings and you’ll have to do the same amount of community service hours. But to maintain the academy’s image, I’m sad to say that you will not be able to come back next year.”

“What!?” Dream slammed his hands on the desk, making them all flinch. “You’re telling me that we travel through the country to save our friend and uncover a fucked up experiment and you’re expelling me for it!?”

“My hands are tied, Dream. They’re already letting you off with no prison time. This is the best punishment I found for you, otherwise, they would’ve taken you to trial.”

Dream snarled, and George put a hand on his shoulder to calm him down. Dream’s body untensed a bit, and he lowered his gaze and sighed heavily. Then, he pulled back, keeping his grimace as he asked, “What about George?”

O’Connor looked toward him. George only stared back. “I’ll admit it was hard to negotiate a deal for you, George.” There was a moment of silence in which George took Dream’s hand and felt the worry in Dream’s aura prick at him. “But since Mark Bryan is alive, you won’t be charged with manslaughter and sent to a maximum containment prison.”

His friends let out a sigh of relief, but George’s expression stayed blank. He pursed his lips and closed his eyes.

“I have instead made a deal for you to be sent to Elysium.”

“What?”

“That can’t be!”

“No.”

Skeppy, Sapnap, and Dream said simultaneously, Dream’s voice coming out eerily quiet.

George was silent. His heart was beating. His friend’s emotions were drowning him. Dream squeezed his hand. The tears nearly escaped him.

“After what they did to him!?” Sapnap exclaimed.

“Unfortunately, George’s case is very complicated considering his recent... power developments. If he doesn’t accept the treatment, he’ll be taken to Blackwood instead.”

“But it’s basically the same thing! People who go to Elysium don’t get out. It’s a prison in itself. Isn’t there another option?” Sapnap demanded.

O’Connor had the nerve to sigh as if the next words he uttered next were hard for him to admit.

“There isn’t.”

“We won’t let them.”

Dream hadn't stopped pacing since they'd left O'Connor's office. They were at the library now. It would probably be the last time he'd get to be there with his friends. Except this time, there was no fond memory to make.

"We'll do something. We can run away! Just like, pack our bags and go to another country or something."

"And we'll be fugitives," George pointed out from his spot on the couch. Dream stopped and he met his gaze. George narrowed his eyes. "Again."

"I don't care! We can even seek refuge with the Bergman Defenders!"

"They'll be looking for me even more then," George said. He understood Dream's desperation, but George knew there wasn't another way. There had never been another way. He had tried to deny it to himself, but despite it, deep down, he had always known it would end this way—with his deepest nightmare coming to life. The only upside was that his friends were safe. Maybe it was for the best after all. "Plus, after what I did to Bryan, I doubt Phil would want to take me."

"I can make him change his mind, I can—"

"Dream, stop." George muttered, tired. He closed his eyes, breathing in through his nostrils and feeling a tear fall onto his lap. He felt Sapnap sit next to him and an arm wrap around his back, pulling him closer.

"Maybe... in a few years," Bad started, though judging by the silence, he wasn't sure how to end that statement.

"You're strong, George," Sapnap said. "And you're a stubborn bitch."

"I'm going to miss you guys." George stared at his hands, opening his eyes and staring at the blurry floor.

There was a slam on the table, and when George looked up, he only saw the back of Dream as he stormed off.

"He's just upset he can't do anything to help you," Sapnap told him.

George nodded. The action only made his heart break further. He wiped his eyes and got on his feet. "I'll go talk to him."

Outside the library, Dream was pressed against the wall in the hallway staring at nothing with puffy red eyes. George sat down beside him and placed his head on his shoulder. Dream didn't say anything, but he did lean his head against his.

George swallowed the knot in his throat. Dream's aura was heavy on his chest. It made him breathe harder and made the back of his eyes itch, but there was also a pent-up fury that caused his knuckles to tingle, making him want to punch the nearest wall hard enough to break his fist.

"It's not your fault," he told Dream.

"I shouldn't have pushed you to come to the convention with us," Dream said. "You wouldn't have lost control. They wouldn't be blaming you for hurting Bryan."

"It was my decision, Dream. If it was anyone's fault, it was mine."

Dream took his hand and squeezed. His grip was firm, but it didn't hurt. "Don't say that. It wasn't your fault."

"Then it wasn't yours either."

Without answering, Dream turned his head and buried his nose into his hair. George loved feeling Dream's steady breathing. It reminded him that they were here. Now. Together. Just Dream and George.

It came out as a whisper—a lasting cry of desperation that pierced him like a dagger through the chest. Dream said, "You don't have to do this."

"There's no other choice."

"There's always another choice."

A heavy sigh escaped him, and with a grim murmur and a lasting sense of defeat, he replied, "Not for me."

Desolate silence and an aura drowning in regret and disarray was the only response he received. He pressed a soft kiss to Dream's knuckle. "I love you."

"I love you too."

"You'll wait for me?"

"Of course."

"And if we..." George sighed. "If we lose contact? If we don't see each other for years?"

"There's nobody for me but you George."

George smiled. Dream's breathing swayed their bodies gently. Dream's heart was out and open—felt like it could break into a million pieces with a single flick. It nearly broke George. How his best friend, the one who had always instilled hope in him and had always radiated light into his life like a sun, now emitted these forlorn emotions that were no stranger to George. He wished things were different.

For a moment, they remained still. Then, he unraveled his hand from Dream's and slowly slipped off the necklace. He stared at the pretty blue crystal before turning to Dream with a smile.

Dream appeared confused as George opened his palm and placed the necklace inside, closing his fingers around it.

"Keep it," George said, smiling wider. "Don't forget me."

Dream opened his palm and played around with the gem with his other hand. He closed his fist then glimpsed at George and smiled wide. His eyes were filled with tears. He wrapped his arms around him and pulled him tight.

They didn't let go for a long time. Instead, they only pressed against each other tighter, breathed each other's scents and cried together, their hearts' mismatched rhythms playing against each other.

When they walked back into the library, Sapnap took one look at them and then took them into a hug. Bad joined a second later and then pulled a stubborn Skeppy in too.

For the last time, they laughed and joked, and at the end of the night, Dream and George returned to his room and slept wrapped around each other for one last time.

George stared at the plane before him. It was the same plane that had brought him to AGE all those years ago. Back when he'd first seen the island, he'd been in awe of it. He found it beautiful from above, but even then, he'd known how vastly his life would change. Now, here he was, in the same place. George had never thought he would grow to love the island as much as he did.

It's hard to judge the value of something.

It's hard to know how much your life really depends on it—you only really know until the moment you lose it. For George, this was his moment.

His hand was wrapped around the handle of his luggage tightly.

He had woken up that morning nuzzled into the back of Dream's neck. Dream joked that it was the only time he would let him be the big spoon, and George laughed.

They had breakfast with their friends in the mess hall. Dream got a stack of over six pancakes and a plate full of bacon, claiming he was still a growing teen. Sapnap called him a piss baby for it. George ate a plate of fruit because the nervous energy from him and his friends made him nauseous.

Sapnap had stolen some of his strawberries because he claimed they had run out of them, but George knew he was just too lazy to go get them. Bad and Skeppy sat next to each other. George thought it was cute the way they had been inseparable ever since Skeppy had gotten Bad back. He only teased Skeppy about it once, mostly as a revenge plot for all the times he had been teased during their road trip. Skeppy told him he was lucky that it was his last day, otherwise he would've pulled the best prank on him. George smiled and laughed.

After breakfast, they gathered outside by the classroom building where a driver would pick up George to take him to the island airport. George hugged Bad first, seeing as he was the one bawling the hardest, asking George to take care of himself and letting him know that he'd send all the muffins he could if he was allowed to. His hug with Skeppy was brief, if only just a pat on the back, but there was a mutual understanding in it.

"I swear if you forget about me Georgie," Sapnap had threatened with his very tight hug.

George laughed and, through a strained voice from where he could barely breathe, replied, "Who could forget your stupid insults?"

"Hm, I'll hold you to that."

When he had let go of Sapnap, he turned to Dream who stared at him with a blank look for a second before enveloping him in his arms. He hugged the hardest, of course. Also the longest. His emotions were missing, and after almost half a minute into the hug, George whispered, "I want to feel you."

Dream had understood, and when his aura drowned George, the tears slipped out in an instant. He hugged more desperately then.

He still felt Dream's warmth around him as he got into the car and waved goodbye. It wasn't until they had arrived at the airport that George felt cold again.

“Are you ready, George?” the flight assistant asked him as he approached the plane. George nodded.

And as the plane began its ascent, George looked out the window—admired the hood of trees and pretty beaches, the birds flying in formations and the mountains adorning the distant landscape.

He took in his home one last time.

Empty.

It was the only way to describe what Dream felt as he stared at their tree.

He closed his eyes, and he remembered. He remembered the day he met George. He remembered how he was messing around the forest exploring every part of the island he could. He remembered how he spotted the lonely boy. He remembered how he was amazed at how the boy was choosing to read a dusty old book instead of playing on the beach where they were welcoming all the new students. He remembered how scared George looked when he admitted he was a Psychic and how surprised he was when Dream told him it was cool.

His smile was pretty. It was bright. It made him feel funny.

It was then when he vowed to himself that he would do everything in his power to get George smiling like that every day.

He heard Sapnap approach before he even spoke. His footsteps were distinct. They were wide and laidback, and his shoes crunched every leaf and twig in the nearby vicinity.

“He’s really gone.”

“Yeah.” Dream toyed with the gem on his neck. He had been touching it ever since George had given it to him. He liked closing his eyes and picturing George whenever he did it. George had always clutched it hard, often when he was scared and stressed. Dream liked to do it when he felt nostalgic, whenever he wanted to relieve a memory of them. In this case, he relived the distant memory of George and Dream waking up in the middle of the night by their tree one day at fourteen because they’d fallen asleep and it’d started pouring on them. He smiled.

“You’ll be gone too.” Sapnap’s words surprised him and he turned to him. Sapnap was staring at the ground, pursing his lip with his fists clenched at his sides. A tear slipped down his cheek. “Next year.”

His voice nearly broke him and Dream instantly walked over to pull him into a tight hug. “Sap...”

“It’s okay, just... I guess, it’s life, huh?”

“We’re still going to be best friends.” Dream tightened his hold on Sapnap when he felt him whimper. “I’ll never leave you.”

“You left.” It was barely a peep. Anybody else would’ve probably not heard it.

Dream pulled away and stared at Sapnap, confused. Sapnap’s eyes were red and his hurt expression made him almost start crying too. “What?” he whispered back.

“In Seattle. You left.”

Dream's heart dropped. He opened his mouth a few times, unsure of how to respond. He'd forgotten about it. How had he forgotten about it? He hadn't even apologized, even though he knew how sensitive Sapnap was to abandonment. He put his hands on Sapnap's arms and squeezed a bit, still trying to come up with an answer, an apology, an excuse—anything.

"It's okay. I know why you did it. It's just—" A sob. A flinch. A heave. "I woke up after the car crash and you weren't there and I was chained to a bed by myself and it just... it still hurts."

Dream wrapped his arms around him again and then caressed the back of his head gently, closing his eyes and sighing. "Sapnap. I promise you." He pulled him in tighter. "I promise on my life that I'll never leave you like that again. I love you, okay? You're my best friend."

Sapnap sobbed softly and he slowly calmed down. He let out a chuckle against his shoulder, and it made Dream smile. "Careful there or George'll think you're cheating."

Dream laughed. "You're so dumb." He pulled away and looked at him with a smile. "Want to go play video games in the theater?"

Sapnap snorted. "They won't let us in after the mess we made last time."

Dream shrugged, his grin growing wider. "I can steal the key."

Rolling his eyes, Sapnap let out a light laugh and nodded. "Deal."

Maybe it was the absence of George's fluffy hair against his nose. The way he smelled like coconut mixed with a soft petrichor that elevated his heart rate and made Dream feel dizzy with the addictiveness of it. Maybe it was him missing the way George sometimes mumbled in his sleep and took deep breaths, smiled like he was living in a nice memory. Maybe it was because he could no longer admire the way the moon made George's skin glow and reminded Dream of how hard he'd fallen. How deeply in love he had been with his best friend for all those years.

But late at night, Dream found himself roaming the hallways of the Bio-E dorm rooms because he couldn't fall asleep. Everything was quiet of course. He was walking barefoot because he didn't want to wake anyone, and seeing as Bio-E's could probably hear someone's footsteps across the hall, he had to be extra careful.

As he approached the lounge room of his floor, he halted. Something was off. He sniffed the air and then heard the soft brush of something against the wall. He pretended to keep walking and as he rounded the corner, he took the person by the collar of their shirt in one second and pressed them against the wall.

As it turned out, it wasn't an intruder.

"Techno?"

"Nice to see you too, Dream."

"What the hell are you doing here!?"

"Oh you know, just takin' a midnight stroll on a floor that isn't even mine. Mind putting me down?"

"Oh." Dream let him go and then stared at him in befuddlement as he adjusted his shirt. "How did

you even get in here? I thought there was a reward for your head after they found out you were a part of the Bergman Defenders?”

Techno chuckled and dismissed him with a wave of his hand. “It’s only like a reward of a thousand. I’ve seen worse.”

Rolling his eyes, Dream laughed and crossed his arms. “So?”

“So.” Techno nodded and mimicked him. “I have a proposition for you.”

“What is it?”

“Heard that you’re gettin’ kicked out of AGE.”

Dream raised an eyebrow. “How did you find out?”

“A little birdie told me.” Dream looked unconvinced. Techno shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. What matters is: Phil’s offering you a spot on the team.”

Dream froze. His arms felt limp at his sides. He stared at Techno for almost a minute until Techno cleared his throat like he was letting him know he was still there. “Really?”

“No,” Techno stated and kept a straight face. “I traveled to the island even though I’m wanted by the government to play a sick prank on you. Get owned, nerd!”

Dream covered his mouth and contained his laughing seeing as they were still in the middle of the hallway in the middle of the night and he especially couldn’t wake up anyone now that there was a wanted criminal with him. Not that Techno wouldn’t be capable of getting away in the time it took for someone to call a prefect, but Dream didn’t really feel like causing a whole scene.

“On one condition,” Dream finally said.

It was Techno’s turn to raise an eyebrow. “Talk.”

Dream smirked. “I bring a friend with me.”

Chapter End Notes

Update (as of December 25, 2022):

The sequel [Elysium is out and in progress](#)

The paperback version of Aether's Legacy is out [here](#)!

The awesome @WolfMangos on Twitter created a discord server for Aether's Legacy/Elysium if you would like to join [here](#)

my [tumblr](#) & [twitter](#)

Update (as of September 19, 2021):

The first chapter of the sequel, Elysium, is set to release on 12/24/2021. You can keep

up with any updates about it on my twitter @Mel_LightNS :))



Yes, a sequel was planned for this story before I even started writing it soooo aha... I don't have all the details yet but I will probably talk a little bit about the plan during the stream and also post it on my tumblr or twitter. The stream will take place [here](#) on Thursday, June 10th around 6 PM CT and the form for you to send early questions and topics so I have an idea on what I'm going to talk about is [here](#). You can also send

questions on the chat the day of of course :))

Also, if you don't know I do plan to revise and maybe hire a proofreader for this story and will be changing names/details to self-publish through Amazon for anyone who wants a physical copy. I obviously won't take this down. It's just because I wanted to have a physical copy of my story (which I've done before so I know how the process works) and several of y'all have shown interest in having one too, so I might as well make it be available to all. The cost is only going to be for the printing and shipping so I'll make it as low as I can since it is free here and I don't want to profit from it. I'll be updating everyone about that on my socials so stay tuned if you're interested :))

Love y'all so much! Thank you for making this journey so worth it for me! You've made one of my biggest dreams come true!

Mucho Amor,

Light <3

[tumblr](#) & [twitter](#)

End Notes

This project has (I'm not joking) taken me hundreds of hours, so if you enjoy it, please drop a kudos and a comment (it's free and you don't even need an account to do it)! It also means the world to me when people share my story!

You can follow my Twitter [@Mel_LightNS](#) for updates! Thanks for reading :))

Light <3

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!